# Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged by canijustsaysomethingcrazy

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**Summary:**

Set two years after Mädchen in Uniform (1958) After leaving Empress Augusta Boarding School, Fräulein von Bernburg goes back to a more ordinary, uneventful life she comes to enjoy. When she receives an unsettling offer, she is faced with the opportunity to resume her former position, and reunite with the one person she had made the promise to forget, Manuela von Meinhardis.

**Relationships:** Elisabeth von Bernburg/Manuela von Meinhardis
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# 1. Chapter 1

**Author's Note:**

> Hello dear (potential) readers!
> This is my first published FF and the first ever based on the wonderful movie Mädchen in Uniform. This story was inspired by the 1958 remake. I hope you will enjoy it, and if you do/don't, feel free to share your comments and suggestions.
> For a little bit of context, the story takes place 2 years after the end of the movie, in which I assumed Manuela must have been 15. So she will be 17 in my story, and Elisabeth's will be 34 - twice Manuela's age, yes.
> I must also specify that I am French and that, although I will take care of proofreading each chapter carefully, this will not be beta'd.
> All mistakes are mine, and mine only, which is not the case for any of the characters depicted in this story.
> Enjoy!

***November 1912***

Elisabeth von Bernburg looked at her reflection for one last time before heading to the door. She made sure her hair was correctly in place and her blouse immaculate, and she reached for her briefcase. Today, she would do something she never thought she would do again. She was going back to Empress Augusta Boarding School.

After what was decorously referred to as “the incident” had happened, the teacher had left her employment without delay. As Manuela von Meinhardis was still lying in the infirmary bed, recovering from her suicide attempt, she had vowed she would never find herself in such a terrible position again, and had left the school without a goodbye to her beloved students. She had not left Potsdam, however. After a childhood spent moving to various garrison towns

as the career of her general of a father dictated, she had finally been able to put down roots, somewhere. And where could she go, at any rate? Having to resign from her teaching position was sufficiently heart-breaking already. She needed to recompose herself and to think about what she wanted to do with her life.

The first thing she did after leaving school was to rent a small house on the outskirts of town. It was not extravagant, nor particularly big, but it was comfortable and cosy, and in no time, she felt more at home here than anywhere before. With the little money saved from all her years of teaching, Elisabeth decided to go back to what had been her passion before working at Empress Augusta. She purchased a few supplies, and took up painting again. She had been told she had talent, once. Certainly, it would not hurt to occupy her days with an activity before finding another suitable position. At first, she felt a little out of practice; her lines were somewhat clumsy and lacking in precision, but it was not long before her technique and inspiration were back. Soon enough, her whole study was filled with canvas of various sizes, and the place was officially turned into a painting room. She would paint spontaneously, finding inspiration in the most common, yet inestimable wonders of life -a beautiful landscape, a bouquet of roses, an elegant woman passing by.

One day, as she was applying the final touches to a watercolour of wild daffodils in the park, she was surprised to meet an art enthusiast who offered to buy her painting. She was rather perplexed, but as money was becoming scarce, she accepted, convinced it was merely a chance encounter and a one-time occurrence. Little did she know this would only the beginning of her recognition as a talented local painter. Soon, she was offered to exhibit her work and to her infinite surprise, selling enough of it to make a comfortable living.

For the first time in what seemed like ages, Fräulein von Bernburg felt happy, and finally fulfilled in doing something she liked without restraint. However, more often than not, she found herself thinking back to her previous life. She missed teaching. She missed seeing her girls every morning for class, looking up to her with so much trust and expectation. And although she had vowed to forget everything about her, to never even let her mind wander to her again, she was

missing Manuela more than anything. She often found herself wondering about the girl, about how she was doing now, how she was growing up… The memory of her ice-blue eyes was always there somewhere, latent but relentless. Some nights, those seemed to be boring into her soul, keeping her awake, tormenting her. On those nights, she would get up from her bed, and still in her nightgown, she would start painting Manuela's face as she remembered it. Of course, those were portraits she would never sell. Her only link to Manuela henceforth… until that day.

She had just come back from her morning walk to town, her basket still tucked under her arm, when she found the envelope in her letterbox bearing a stamp she recognised all-too-well. With shaking hands, she broke the seal and began reading.

*'Dear Fräulein von Bernburg,*

*I am surely the last person you would expect to receive a letter from, also, allow me to be forthright in my solicitation. Since you have left your employ at Empress Augusta Boarding School, I am saddened to admit that the reliability of our teaching team has been going downhill. It took several weeks to find you a replacement and, unfortunately, and despite our best efforts, no candidates were suitable to maintain the position long enough. Our eleventh teacher in less than two years has left us just this morning without notice. The parents who entrusted us with their daughters' education are expecting the utmost excellence as a reflection of the Empress' name and the very best teachers, which, as we realised at our expense, includes you, Fräulein von Bernburg.*

*As you may know, Fräu Oberin's health has drastically declined over the past year, and she has put me in charge of holding the position of Headmistress until she is fully recovered. Also, I have to reveal that I am reaching out to you at her insistence, and for she is convinced you will accept to help us out in these troubled times. By this letter, I am asking you to come back and resume your position as a teacher among us. It may be only for a few months, until we find someone who can effectively replace you. If you value these girls as much as you once said you did, I am sure you will make the right decision. Name your conditions, and you will be welcomed at Empress Augusta as if you had never left.*

*I am hoping to hear about your decision promptly,*

*Your faithful colleague and friend,*

*Fräulein von Racket'*

Elisabeth slapped the letter down on the table angrily. How dare this vicious snake ask her anything like that, and call herself her friend, above all else! The nerve! The audacity!

The former teacher took the missive in her hand, ready to rip it to pieces and never hear about Fräulein von Racket, or Empress Augusta Boarding School ever again. But just as she was about to, she caught sight of her most recent portrait of Manuela which was still in need of final touches but was already looking disturbingly realistic. In the darkness of the study, it was almost as if the real Manuela was peering at her. She approached the canvas, hypnotised by the girl's face, reaching out for it. Closing her eyes, she tried to conjure the real image of her in her mind. Manuela looked probably more like a woman now. Did her hair darken, somewhat? Did she still have this innocent, childlike twinkle in her eyes? Maybe her lips were fuller now and… Shaking her head at this improper thought, Elisabeth let out a hopeless sigh and dropped her hand in defeat. She knew she would become crazy if she ignored the opportunity to see Manuela again. She should have never read this letter… But now she had, and she could not ignore what the idea of resuming her position, of being reinstated as a reliable, honest teacher and of seeing her beautiful Manuela again did to her.

But what if her return troubled Manuela? It had been almost two years now, she probably had moved on –certainly, she had forgotten about her. And if she hadn't, it would be even crueller of her to come back. No. She didn't have the right to resume her position as a teacher. For Manuela's sake, she would not accept Fräulein von Racket's offer, and she would be telling her so in person on this very afternoon.

## 2. Chapter 2

When she arrived in front of the gigantic iron gates shielding the school from the exterior, Elisabeth von Bernburg felt a mix of dread, uneasiness and something else, something that resembled trepidation -or maybe it was the mere nauseating feeling of having to deal with Racket again.

She wanted this visit to be quick and, most importantly, discreet. She had been careful to avoid recess time or any moment the girls would potentially be out of class. Although most of her former students may not remember her, and the new ones had probably never even heard of her, she crossed the park with her head down in the event she encountered anyone. She quickly reached the steps leading to the huge building and looked up at the dark, austere walls that stirred up so many memories. As she was about to enter the main hall, she felt some resistance on the doorknob and realised someone was trying to open the door from the inside. She heard a gasp, and before she even had time to register who was in front of her, she was enveloped in a feisty hug.

“Fräulein von Bernburg! I can’t believe it! Is it really you? Are you coming back?” she heard the girl she now had recognised as Ilse von Westhagen blabber hastily.

“Westhagen, Westhagen!” she laughed as she pushed herself away from the enthusiastic embrace. “Slow down, you are crushing me!”

The girl immediately let go and looked down in embarrassment, cheeks flaming. She had not changed much, still with her charming overbite and her eyes full of mischief. She had grown a lot though and lost a bit of her baby cheeks. On reflection, Elisabeth thought she looked rather thin and pale, and hoped it wasn’t due to the school’s strict food restriction policy.

“I’m sorry, Fräulein von Bernburg… I’m just so happy to see you!”

“It’s quite alright,” she replied with an indulgent smile. “Shouldn’t

you be in class? I don't recall…" -she looked at her watch- "…half past two being recess time."

"It is not… I was just…"

"Going for a stroll in the park, I assume?" she asked playfully.

"Yes…" the girl admitted, lowering her head. "But we don't have class at this time. We haven't had a teacher for weeks. The others are in the study room, and Rackow is pretending to teach history again!"

"Well, it was nice seeing you again. You should go back to the study room now. Goodbye, Westhagen," Elisabeth said curtly, trying to ignore the girl's obvious need to confide in her. She turned on her heels and headed for the stairs. She could already feel guilt gnawing at her and she could not afford to get sentimental now. Composed and unwavering- this was how she would deal with Fräulein von Racket.

"But, you're coming back, aren't you Fräulein von Bernburg? And Manuela, oh – she would be so happy if you came back among us!"

At the name, of course, the former teacher could not refrain from turning back to face Westhagen. She knew it was the worst idea, but she had to ask.

"How is… Meinhardis these days?" she ventured, trying to sound as disinterested as possible.

Ilse von Westhagen, who was usually so theatrical and prone to exaggeration seemed alarmingly sincere when she shook her head, and sighed in pity at the mention of her classmate.

"Not very well since you left us, Fräulein von Bernburg. She is always so quiet. I thought it would get better but she seems so very sad all the time. She misses you for sure…"

Though the words cut right through her, Elisabeth could not let it

show and gave the young girl a reproving look.

“Enough of this nonsense, Westhagen! Meinhardis will be just fine. Go back to your classmates now before I am compelled to report to Fräulein von Racket that I saw you wandering around the hall.”

“Y-yes, Fräulein von Bernburg…” the girl said, shocked by the student change in tone. She bowed quickly, before dashing off to the study room.

Shaking her head, Fräulein von Bernburg tried to no avail to forget this conversation, and remain focused on the initial reason for her presence here; rejecting Racket’s proposal and resuming her convenient, quiet life. There would be no negotiation. She would be firm, incisive and resolute. As she made her way to the main office, where she assumed Fräulein von Racket had settled since becoming the temporary Headmistress, she squeezed her fists in determination. Once at the door, she took a deep breath and knocked lightly. Almost immediately, she heard a chair being knocked down, and hurried footsteps come from behind the door.

“Ye-es?” she heard Racket’s distinctively irritating intonation and pushed the door open.

“Fräulein von Racket,” the former teacher said, before advancing to give the not-so-surprised woman a short handshake. “Sorry for coming in unannounced, but I received your letter just this morning, and I would like to set things straight in person.”

The other woman was observing her with a knowing smile, visibly confident as she motioned for her to sit down. *Not quite, you old viper*, Elisabeth thought but she still took the offered seat, reluctantly.

“Elisabeth, how lovely to see you. What can I do for you today?” Fräulein von Racket asked in an overly sweet voice.

Elisabeth had to physically refrain from rolling her eyes at the unnatural familiarity and cleared her throat, deciding she had better

cut to the chase right away.

“As you are certainly aware, since you were able to procure my address somehow, I have moved on from teaching and therefore am no longer interested in resuming my work here, at Empress Augusta. I came here to thank you for your offer in person, as it was… elegant of you to solicit me, but I am afraid I have to reject it.”

Racket was pursing her lips, but remained silent, obviously racking her brain to come up with a suitable argument. Not wanting to give her the opportunity to make a comment on this decision, Elisabeth quickly rose from her chair.

“It is a shame, really… the girls were so looking forward to your return.”

## 3. Chapter 3

“The… the girls? None of the girls know. I ran into Ilse von Westhagen in the hallway on my way here and nothing in her attitude suggested she was aware of your offer.”

“Westhagen was wandering in the hallway again? This insolent child never learns,” Fräulein von Racket said with a sneer. “But I am not surprised she has not heard of your return. I announced it this morning during breakfast, which Westhagen missed since she was in detention for smuggling yet another letter.”

“I see the methods here haven’t changed and are still as efficient. No wonder the girl looked so skinny,” Elisabeth said disapprovingly.

“Her disregard for the rules gives me no choice but to punish her. And this goes for all the girls around,” Fräulein von Racket added evasively, with a sidelong glance.

“You didn’t even know what my decision would be and yet you announced my return?”

“Forgive me, Fräulein von Bernburg! I was so sure you would not turn this opportunity down… I did put the cart before the horse, it seems.”

Elisabeth couldn’t believe her ears, and pointed an accusative finger at the woman in front of her.

“After you moved heaven and earth to see me go when I was rightfully employed here? You call this an ‘opportunity’? If I recall the tone of your letter, you were all but pleading for me to come back, to rescue you from your delicate position. Remember, Fräulein von Racket, that you were the one to reach out to me. You are the one so desperately looking for a teacher that you contacted me, although you looked for any occasion to have me out of your way

when I was working here!"

Holding her hands in front of her as if to appease the tension, the older woman said, "It is true, Elisabeth… I apologise. Please, let me expose the reality of our situation to you."

The former teacher huffed indignantly but crossed her arms in front of her, ready to listen to whatever explanation Fräulein von Racket's twisted mind would conjure.

"You see, since you left us, the school has not been the same. As I said in the letter, we had all the difficulty in the world to find a teacher to take up your position. But the girls, it seemed, were no longer motivated, no longer eager to learn. Even the theatre group is falling apart and none of them is dedicated enough to learn a role. Just think! Mademoiselle Aubert is threatening to quit almost every week! At first, of course, we were taking drastic measures, applying stricter punishments and expelling the most reluctant students, but after a while, parents began to withdraw their daughters from school themselves. Can you imagine the affront! Saying the treatment here was unfit, unworthy of the price they were paying for their daughter's education! It became clear that our clientele –pardon my words– was eluding us and it was unacceptable…"

Fräulein von Bernburg scoffed at the bad taste of the comparison. It had always been obvious that Fräu Oberin considered the students to be walking wombs only meant to breed future soldiers, and that Fräulein von Racket viewed their well-off families as money-makers. How could these two women have so little respect and consideration for young girls?

"Are you saying you have been losing money because of me?" Elisabeth said, raising an incredulous eyebrow.

"But of course not, Fräulein von Bernburg… However, we find ourselves in a precarious position because our girls are devastated by your departure and cannot seem to recover from it. As you probably have guessed…" she purposely let the end of the sentence hang in the air, for dramatic effect, then resumed, "Meinhardis was the most

affected by your loss."

Of course, she would use this against her. It was a glaring bait and Elisabeth knew she should have expected it, but her heart took over and the words were out of her mouth before she even realised:

"I want to see her."

Suddenly, Racket's face split in a spine-chilling grin of triumph.

"Oh Elisabeth, you know I cannot allow it if you are not planning on staying with us. This would only confuse the poor girl further. But you may see her every day, if you wish. I only need you to sign this contract and you will resume your position as early as tomorrow, 8 o'clock. Your room will be ready then."

Fräulein von Bernburg clenched her jaw, but said nothing. She had left school for Manuela, had thought about rejecting Fräulein von Racket's offer for Manuela, but what if leaving her in an establishment ran by a women-hating, prejudiced lunatic like Racket was even worse a fate for the girl? She had to think fast. She recalled Westhagen's miserable and sullen attitude. How could Manuela possibly be in a good disposition? She was almost 17 now and she still had a full year left at boarding school. Maybe coming back was not such a disastrous idea, in the end, for Manuela. For all the girls, really. Maybe she would be able to give them a little comfort, some sort of aspiration for the future. Wasn't youth supposed to be a time full of discovery and optimism after all?

"Fine. I will come back," she said in what she hoped was a steady and controlled tone. "But as you said in your letter, I will name my conditions and will tolerate no discussions. Either you take it, or leave it."

Fräulein von Racket, more callous than particularly clever, nodded her head in acknowledgment, seemingly inclined to accept just about anything now that she felt the game was won. She took her pen and

dipped it in the ink, ready to amend the contract.

“I will not be living at school. As you know already, I have a perfectly lovely house just nearby, and I am not willing to part with it. It will certainly be less confusing for the children to see me arrive in the morning, and leave in the evening as a simple teacher.”

“Forsooth, it does sound agreeable to me,” Fräulein von Racket beamed at her.

“That’s not all,” she added pointedly. “The girls will have more liberties from now on.”

“Liberties? Oh, but surely Fräu Oberin would not approve of a more indulgent policy. You know how attached she is to discipline.”

“You are the one in charge, now, not her. It is up to you to make the decisions that will potentially save this school from falling apart. I don’t think Fräu Oberin’s militaristic approach is working on the girls anymore. You don’t need their fear, but their trust. And believe me when I say that you will be rewarded by their gratitude. They will start working studiously again; they will do all efforts to make you proud and their parents will be satisfied when they come back as sensible, educated young women. I can vouch for it,” Elisabeth declaimed passionately.

Unconvinced, but ever pliant, Fräulein von Racket pursed her lips and asked: “What do you suggest?”

“One monthly day of leave for them to spend as they please. A Sunday. They may see their families if they are in town, or go to the cinema... Whatever reasonable activity they enjoy. Also, no more economy on the bread and butter. They are in full growth and there is no reason to deprive them of food, above all else.”

“But…”

“These are my conditions. Discipline and order will still be enforced

by all means, but they need some sort of consolation prize if we want for them to be productive and obedient. I won't stand for these girls to be treated like worthless animals. Do you agree with my terms?"

Reluctantly, Fräulein von Racket added the last request to the contract and handed her the pen and paper with a conquered nod. Smiling to herself, Elisabeth signed the contract, satisfied she had stood up against Fräulein von Racket and ensured at least a few improvements in the students' lives. And of course, she would get to see Manuela… Just as the thought of her beloved student crossed her mind, she was interrupted by Fraülein von Racket's voice.

"However, Dear Fräulein von Bernburg… I must warn you. Since you have left school, and because of the incident, rumours have been going on about your integrity towards the girls. Oh, of course, I have nothing but unconditional trust for you, but I would not want the parents to become aware of any… misplaced affections within this establishment, if I may say so."

At this insinuation, Elisabeth rose from her seat and declared: "I hope you are not implying what I think you are, Fräulein von Racket. As I said countless times, my conscience is clear and I have nothing to be ashamed of. The girls appreciate me precisely because of my fair treatment towards them. There was never any sort of unhealthy corruption involved!"

"Of course, dear. I merely want you to understand that some student's 'appreciation' may go beyond simple recognition for your… compliant behaviour, but I trust you will have no issues remaining professional with even the most enamoured of them."

# 4. Chapter 4

Ilse von Westhagen kicked open the door to the study room and ran excitedly towards the board, climbing on the office chair in the same breath. Marga von Rackow, who acted in quality of foster mother, supervisor and 'damn nuisance', as the other students would say, quickly jumped to her feet and took her by the arm to pull her down.

"Are you mad? Go sit down!"

"Let me go, you pig! Everyone, I have an announcement to make!"

The girls turned to her with expectant eyes, stopping whatever they were doing altogether.

"What is it, Ilse?" Wolzogen asked eagerly.

"Well? Tell us!" said another.

"It's Fräulein von Bernburg!" Ilse said, jumping up and down and clapping her hands.

There was a general sigh and she saw the others shrug in concert, before turning their attention back to their books.

"But… aren't you excited? Don't you want to know what this is about?" Westhagen asked in shock.

From her usual place at the back of the room, Manuela said gloomily: "We know what this is about. Racket came to us this morning saying she had contacted Fräulein von Bernburg and requested that she come back as our teacher. It is merely a cruel ruse to incite us to work, now that all her nasty punishments are proving unsuccessful. But don't get your hopes up. Wherever she is, Fräulein von Bernburg has forgotten all about us, and she is never coming back…"

At her side, Erika -Yvette- von Kleist, who had quickly become

Manuela's best friend, frowned in sympathy and took her hand in hers, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"You don't understand," Ilse pursued, agitating her arms in the air to regain her classmates' attention. "I just saw her in the hallway! She was here!"

At the words, Meinhardis jumped from her chair and all but rushed to Westhagen, grabbing her energetically by the arms and almost making her fall from her perch in the process.

"What are you saying?! Is it true? Is she still here?" she asked in frenzy.

"I think she was headed to Racket's office. But Manuela, you can't be seen hanging about in the hall; you'll get detention for sure if someone sees you! I was lucky to bump into Fräulein von Bernburg. Oh, she is even prettier than I remember!"

Manuela stumbled back, overcome by thousands of emotions, and Kleist came rushing to her to keep her from falling down.

"I need to see her…" she said in a feeble voice.

"She's right, Manuela. You should stay out of trouble, remember the last time she punished you… She's even worse than before."

"I don't care! I need to see her if she's here," she cried out, her eyes wild. As she saw the others try to approach her, she held her hands out in front of her protectively in case anyone would try to stop her, and she made a beeline for the door. At that moment, nothing was more important than finding the woman she thought she would never see again. Just as she was about to ascend the stairs, she saw the distinctive dark silhouette of Fräulein von Racket. She stopped dead in her tracks in the hope she could turn away without being noticed, but it was too late.

"Meinhardis!" the new Headmistress shot her an icy glare as she

descended the stairs to come to her level, and for some reason, it was quickly replaced by a mild, uncharacteristic smile. On instinct, Manuela took a step back and bowed her head.

“Fräulein von Racket… I apologise. I was looking for…”

“For Fräulein von Bernburg I assume, Meinhardis. She just left my office.”

Ready to ignore the rules yet again, Manuela turned around and was about to race outside in the hope to catch Fräulein von Bernburg, but Racket’s voice stopped her.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. You wouldn’t want to spend the day of Fräulein von Bernburg’s return in detention now, would you?”

Manuela had to grip the railing to prevent her knees from giving way. She was trembling all over and would not have been able to control the tremor in her voice if she tried.

“Is it true? She… she really is coming back, then?”

With a scornful shrug, von Racket said, “Indeed. And I hope this generous offer I made to take her back will mean you and your lazy classmates will be more dedicated in your work by now. I did this for you all, since Fräulein von Bernburg seems so irreplaceable…”

“I promise, Fräulein von Racket!” Manuela said eagerly, trying very hard to contain her joy in front of the woman even as her heart was threatening to burst in her ribcage.

“However, Meinhardis… Be warned. I don’t want any rumours going around, or any hint of your scandalous inclinations. If I hear about the slightest suspicious look from you –OR from her- I will make sure you never set foot in this school again. Am I making myself clear? Our reputation is at stake,” Fräulein von Racket announced menacingly.

“Of course, Fräulein von Racket. I will be on my best behaviour,” she said with a quick bow and made her way back to the study room, not without craning her neck when passing by the window in case Fräulein von Bernburg was still around.

When she entered the room, all students turned to her expectantly.

“Well? Have you seen her?”

“No. I ran into Racket,” she made a face, and then looked at her friends with disbelieving eyes. “But she is coming back. She really is…”

She heard excited gasps and cries of joy, and a couple of girls even started some sort of awkward jig. Manuela shook her head in wonder and went back to her place, next to Yvette.

“Are you okay?” the blonde girl asked carefully.

“I just can’t believe it… I had this dream so many times. I never thought I would get to see her again,” she said, staring into space.

Kleist laughed and put her head on her shoulder affectionately. “From what I am seeing, you’re not the only one who dreamt of Fräulein von Bernburg’s return.”

Manuela turned her head and asked, “Haven’t you? Aren’t you happy to have her back with us?”

“Of course. She is a wonderful teacher, we are very lucky…” she assured with a tight smile- then added, hesitant, “But I am just afraid that once she comes back, you will no longer be interested in me.”

Manuela frowned in incomprehension. “Yvette, what are you even talking about? You are my friend, and she is… she is just…”

“Do you love me, Manuela?”

“You know I do,” Manuela replied sincerely, because in truth, she was really fond of Yvette. She trusted her implicitly and felt like she

could say anything to her. She never had a friend like her before.

“But you love her more, right?” Kleist murmured, burying her head in her friend’s neck.

At the question, Manuela frowned. Of course she loved Fräulein von Bernburg more. She loved her with all her heart. It had taken her a while to realise what kind of love it was. A physical, visceral love for which she had found quite an accurate description when reading one of Ilse’s forbidden books she was able to sneak into school. This was a love that had only grown in intensity with the years, as if missing Fräulein von Bernburg had allowed her to understand what she really wanted in life, what would make her happy. It had confused her, overwhelmed her, but finally, it had revealed something about herself that had always been here, somewhere. Something she knew she could not speak about, to anyone. Not when her classmates were gushing about what their future husband would look like, avidly describing tall figures, sharp jawlines, and stubbly cheeks. Not when the only thing she could think about before going to sleep was the elegant curve of Fraülein von Bernburg’s neck, the voluptuousness of her hips, or the velvety softness of her skin.

Yvette was not like that. She could not understand. Of course, she felt the need to comfort her friend, but she could not reveal the exact extent of her feelings for Fräulein von Bernburg. And most importantly, she could not lie and diminish these feelings, especially when her heart was swelling with joy at the idea of seeing her again. Just when she was looking for something soothing to say, she was interrupted by Rackow’s loud voice, “Meinhardis, Kleist! No time to fondle, take your book at page 78. I will be checking that all exercises are done in 15 minutes.”

# 5. Chapter 5

That night, Manuela did not sleep a bit. She kept tossing and turning in her bed, imagining terrible scenarios. What if Fräulein von Bernburg did not come, after all? What if she refused talking to her? Or worse, what if she no longer remembered her? As the hours were passing and exhaustion was taking hold of her, even the most incongruous of her thoughts were starting to feel real. How could the others around sleep so peacefully? Morning couldn't come quickly enough for Manuela.

It did come far too quickly, however, for Fräulein von Bernburg who, after two years without teaching, was scared beyond comprehension at the idea of managing a class again. She had barely eaten for supper, and had fallen asleep from exhaustion at her desk reading over her old lesson plans. She had woken up late and disoriented, and now, as she was making her way to the school in a hurry, she was almost regretting her decision to accept the job offer. What if she was not fit to be a teacher anymore? And what if her attraction to Manuela became unbearable? Worst of all… what if she acted on it?

*No. Absolutely not*, she chastised herself. She would never be so reckless, so irresponsible as to let something like that happen. She was a woman of principles and decorum, not some sort of degenerate pervert. She could control herself…

Well, she probably would not have to maintain the position for long, at any rate. Maybe just a few months, until the girls were a little more galvanised and Racket found a suitable teacher for the position. Then, she would be free to leave and go back to her life. Surely it was not that complicated… Of course, every day, she would have to face Manuela von Meinhardis's gaze and try not to pay attention. For long, she had rejected the idea of feeling for the girl more than mere affection and sympathy. Even as she had left school, she was convinced she had been misunderstood and victim of unfair prejudice, as her compassion had been mistaken for a whole other

form of interest. It was beyond belief, scandalous! Manuela was young and innocent, nothing but a child in need of support she had gladly, foolishly provided.

When visions of Manuela's face had started haunting her at random times of the day and night, she had brushed it off as sheer nostalgia towards her former life. When she had started thinking back to their shared kiss, lying in her bed at night –sure- it had been troubling. She had not been kissed in so long; she was probably craving for human contact. However, when, one day as she was walking down the street, a young woman had passed by her smelling exactly as Manuela did and she had almost ran to her to ask what fragrance she was wearing, she realised it was time she stopped denying the true nature of her sentiments.

She was not particularly surprised by these feelings or the fact that Manuela was a girl. In fact, it was familiar, something she had felt before, a long time ago when she was about the same age as Manuela. She had tried to bury this part of herself, but the memories were still there, somewhere, just below the surface of her now very polished and morally acceptable demeanour. For a long time, she had vowed to shut out these feelings, to erase them altogether from her memory. These undignified feelings for her own kind, these depraved, ungodly feelings, as Father had said after he had surprised her and her dear friend Katarina in a passionate embrace… Father had been confident she would be cured, with God and discipline. *Cured*. The very word made her flinch, as she remembered saying it to Manuela. She remembered the look of utter confusion on the girl's face then. "*Cured? Of what?*" she had said in despair. *Of love, my darling. Of a love that is deemed improper in this world*, she had wanted to reply. But she had not. She had said nothing, and left Manuela alone with her questions and her doubts; her reddened eyes and her aching heart.

Her musings were interrupted as she arrived at the school's entrance, for the second time in two days. Looking at the heavy iron gates, she suddenly felt a strange emotion course though her. It was as if she had never left. She squared her shoulders and pushed the gate open. Bracing herself, she made her way up the white clay path, until some movement behind a tree drew her attention. The teacher swiftly

turned her head and was shocked to recognise, standing shyly behind an oak-tree, the silhouette of the very girl who had been occupying her mind just seconds before. She stopped dead in her tracks. She was absolutely not prepared to face Manuela at the moment… Feeling dizzy, Elisabeth knew she needed to maintain her composure at all costs in front of the girl. She drew in a silent breath, and pinched her lips slightly, trying to appear calm, at least on the outside. For a split second, she considered resuming her walk as if nothing had happened, just to push back their inexorable encounter, but she quickly regained her senses. What sort of woman would flee in front of a student? As of today, she was a teacher again, and as it was strictly forbidden for the girls to be in the park outside of recess time, she couldn't let anyone get away with it. Not even Manuela von Meinhardis.

"Meinhardis," she called out warily. "Whatever are you doing here all alone?" She willed her voice to sound firm and steady. Inside, her heart was beating so fast that she feared the girl would hear.

As Manuela emerged from behind the tree, she was finally able to take in her whole appearance. Her first thought, strangely, was how little the girl had changed. Standing awkwardly across from her, in her dark-grey blouse, it looked as though time had stopped on the very day the teacher had left the school and the thought was as comforting as it was overwhelming. Physically incapable of taking her eyes off the girl, she watched intently as she approached her, almost like a lynx would eye its prey. As she grew closer, though, and captured the look on Manuela's face, she could no longer tell for sure which of them was the predator. So close up now, she had to admit her body had changed quite a bit. Her hips were wider, and her stance more poised, more lady-like. At this distance, she could also see the dark rings under her eyes, and she involuntarily frowned in concern although her face was still as beautiful as she remembered. Her eyes were even more striking, framed by long and elegant eyelashes, and her lips were, indeed, fuller. Realising she was staring at her student's lips, Elisabeth shook her head and looked straight into Manuela's eyes, who was watching her with a mixture of adoration and apprehension.

“Well? Are you going to tell me what you are doing in the park?” she asked again, more softly, this time.

“I… got lost” Manuela said in a feeble voice, her chest rising and falling visibly

Elisabeth couldn’t help the rich laugh that escaped her lips. “Of course you did!”

At that and before Elisabeth could register what was happening, Manuela suddenly threw her arms around her, holding the teacher tight against her trembling body. Although her first instinct was to push her away, Elisabeth found herself unable to resist the tender embrace and placed her hands on the girl’s back in comfort, letting it roam freely along shoulders and arms. Manuela in her arms… *At last.* She buried her nose in the girl’s hair and breathed her in, lost in the reality of the moment. Manuela had always been a very emotional being, seeking physical comfort every chance she got with Elisabeth. The first touches and bursts of affection had initially been dismissed as mere childish antics from a girl in desperate need of maternal compassion. But it was clear now that there was nothing childlike in the way Manuela was holding her and, lost in the moment herself, Elisabeth was not in the least concerned about whether or not this was an appropriate attitude for a teacher to have towards her student. When she realised Manuela’s body was shaking with sobs though, she tried to regain her senses and pulled back slightly, with her arms still encircling the girl’s back. Seeing the big, heavy tears rolling down her cheeks has she wept silently made her heart clench, and as she felt her own eyes start to water, she turned her head away in embarrassment.

“Well... Enough of that.”

Ignoring the remark, Manuela forced their eyes to meet, and grabbed the teacher’s waist, entranced. “I thought I would never see you

again," she murmured, her voice firm and husky, and resolutely more mature than what Elisabeth remembered.

Suddenly, the intimacy of the situation dawned on her. Their eyes locked, their chests pressed together, Manuela's hands tightly holding on to her hips … Realising what would happen if Racket -or anyone really- found them in this position, Elisabeth recoiled in shock.

"You shouldn't be here at this hour. I am happy to see you... But we should not start by breaking the rules already. Go wash up and head to class. I think you have a new teacher coming in today," she said with a playful smile.

Reluctantly, but smiling back -how could she not- Manuela nodded and ran up the path leading to the dormitory. Elisabeth watched her go and exhaled audibly. Yes, exactly as if she had never left.

# 6. Chapter 6

As she got back to the dormitory, Manuela, still in awe of her meeting with Fräulein von Bernburg, bumped into a group of her classmates who were chatting animatedly, and did not seem to have noticed her absence. The only one who had, of course, was Yvette, and she was sitting on her bed, brushing her hair. Rising from her position as her friend entered, she quickly came to her side with a questioning look.

"Manuela, where were you?"

"Just… feeding the birds," Manuela replied in the most unconvincing tone Kleist had ever heard.

At the obvious lie, the blonde elbowed her in the ribs and gave her an indulgent smile.

"The birds seem to have had quite an effect on you, you are all flushed."

Manuela was not sure how to reply to that. She knew she had to keep her feelings hidden at all costs, but she was ready to burst at the seams and desperate to talk to her friend. Actually, she wanted to shout her love from Fräulein von Bernburg from the rooftop. Suddenly, she imagined Racket's face if she did and she had to stifle a laugh. Eyeing her suspiciously, Yvette took Manuela by the arm and led her to a corner, away from prying ears.

"You saw her, right? Fräulein von Bernburg. This is why you look so… so…" she prodded gently.

Unable to meet her friend's gaze, Manuela lowered her head.

"You are the best friend I ever had, Yvette!" she squealed out of nowhere, surprising both Yvette and herself. "I... I don't want to lose you," she added shyly.

The other girl put her hand to her mouth to refrain from laughing.

"Why would you lose me, silly?"

"Well… you know," Manuela said pointedly, tilting her head for emphasis.

"You would never lose me for... 'you know'," Yvette said with a compassionate smile and squeezed her friend's shoulder to prove her point. "But this doesn't hurt to hear that I am your best friend."

With a playful push, Manuela said, "Aren't you going to say it back?"

"I need to think about it first," was Yvette's quick-witted response to Manuela's friendship declaration.

"What?" Manuela yelled in mock consternation. "Who are you going to pick as your best friend? Rackow?"

"I'll have you know that Marga is very fond of me, my dear," the girl responded cheekily. Then, she grew serious again and held Manuela's eyes in sincerity. "I am truly happy that you opened up to me, Manuela. It was all I wanted from you, a token of your friendship. And I promise I will always be by your side, no matter what."

"It sounds an awful lot like I'm your best friend, too," Manuela answered with a grin, but quickly reached for Yvette's hand and added, "Thank you. I am happy to have you."

"As I am. So, how do you really feel?" Yvette asked with enthusiasm.

"Like my heart is threatening to burst," Manuela said spontaneously, then frowned and looked around her. As she scanned the room, she realised Treskow's hostile gaze fixed on her. If she had one enemy at school, it was Alexandra von Treskow. For some reason, the blonde girl seemed to despise her. She could not think of anything she might have done to deserve such ire, but Treskow had taken the toxic habit of competing with her and playing dirty tricks on her any chance she got. Well, if she was completely honest, she knew that Alexandra's unrequited attachment to Fräulein von Bernburg had a lot to do with her resentment. Manuela usually did not dwell on it, especially because everyone else was fond of her, but now that Fräulein von

Bernburg was back, she knew she had to be careful around her.

At that moment, the bell rang, indicating it was time for the girls to go to class.

The first fortnight passed swiftly for Fräulein von Bernburg who, after two years of only having to deal with herself and her paintings, realised how demanding the position of teacher could be. She was overwhelmed with work but happy, and the students were thriving. From the moment she had set foot in class that first day and was welcomed with a myriad of smiling, grateful faces, Elisabeth knew she had made the right decision in coming back. Everyone was back to working studiously and obediently, especially Manuela, who was now the top student of her class. Of course, Fräulein von Bernburg was impressed, flattered even, by the girl's efforts and flawless behaviour; she knew Manuela was doing her best to make her proud and it worked like a charm. But she could not let it show and afford raising suspicion around. Racket's barely concealed threat has not necessarily worried her at first, but she felt the imperious need to remain prudent, just in case.

Therefore, she would send subtle hints to make sure her student knew how appreciative she was of her dedication. When Manuela did particularly well in class, she would give her a slight smirk accompanied with a raised eyebrow, and Manuela, inevitably, would blush and lower her head, biting her lower lip to stop herself from beaming. Elisabeth would not admit it out loud, but she was impossibly fond of this lip-biting compulsion. Life was quickly returning to normal, as if the teacher had never left, and the "incident" had never occurred. The students were doing amazingly well and their newfound enthusiasm was contagious. Unbelievably so. One evening after class, while she was getting ready to leave, she heard a light knock on the door and saw Ms Evans, the English teacher, peeking from behind the half-open door.

"Ms Evans," she said in surprise. "Please come in!"

"I'll just be a minute, Fraülein von Bernburg. I just wanted to say how delighted we are to have you back among us. We did not really get a chance to catch up since your return."

Elisabeth smiled at her colleague and nodded in acknowledgment. She was not entirely sure what to make of her. Ms Evans had always been agreeable and polite, but somehow, she did not feel like she could entirely trust her.

"Thank you. I must admit, after being out of practice for so long, I was not sure how I would manage going back to teaching. But the children have readjusted to me quite well."

"I'm sure they did…" Ms Evans said with a tight-lipped smile.

Sensing where this was going, Elisabeth rose from her seat in a smooth motion, and took her briefcase in her hand to indicate she was ready to leave the classroom. "If this is all, Ms Evans, I'm afraid I will have to see you out. I need to get back home and it is already dark outside."

"But of course! I just wanted to warn you… about Meinhardis."

"What about her?" Elisabeth asked with an exasperated sigh. People's constant obsession with her and Manuela was beyond her.

"As you know, the girl is still quite fragile and I was worried that… maybe, your return could compromise her recovery."

"I don't know what you mean by that. Meinhardis –the whole class, really- seems to be doing a lot better now that I am back."

"Oh, I am not implying anything, dear," she assured, tilting her head in an exaggerate show of sympathy. "But I only mean to tell you that walls have ears, and this school is no exception. I am convinced of your rectitude, but some people may be inclined to have you under close scrutiny in case your return caused Meinhardis to… stray away from the right and narrow path," she added, cryptically.

Not wanting to hear another word of this absurdity, Fräulein von Bernburg opened the door, effectively encouraging Ms Evans to step out of the room.

"Thank you for your kind words of encouragement, Ms Evans. I will keep this in mind."

On the way home, she tried to understand what the English teacher had meant exactly with this vague warning. Who were these people she was referring to? Her first thought had been Racket, but why would she go to all this trouble to have are back as a teacher just to dissect her behaviour towards Manuela a mere few weeks after that? She frowned, perplexed. What if it had been her aunt's doing? What if she had tasked Racket with watching Manuela, and by extension, watching her? Surely, she had been informed of the incident involving her niece two years ago, but what exactly had she been told?

Evans did hint at Manuela's attempted suicide… The horrifying vision of the girl gripping the rail, ready to let go and jump into the void surged in her mind and Elisabeth felt a shiver run down her spine. She had purposely avoided thinking back to that night all this time, and made sure to keep this terrible memory locked away. Suddenly, all the emotions she had felt at that time came crashing down on her, and she stumbled, unable to walk the few metres that separated her from her door. Guilt. Manuela had wanted to die because of her. Outrage. Nothing would have happened had it not been for these two insane women who saw perversion at every corner. Despair. She had to leave. Agony. She had to leave the girl she…

A strong hand on her back made her jump in fright and she turned around abruptly, scandalised. The gentleman to whom the proffered hand pertained backed away immediately and gave her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry ma'am. I saw you looking a bit off, all alone in the dark and I thought I should see if you were alright."

She tried to smile back. "Yes… yes I'm alright. Thank you, sir."

"Are you sure?" he asked dubiously.

"Yes, of course. Just a little dizzy. I was just about to go home."

"Alright, then. Have a good night, ma'am," and with that, he was gone.

Recomposing herself, Elisabeth hurriedly walked to her house and, once inside, ran to the washing room to splash water on her face. Her head was still spinning and she fumbled her way along to the nearest chair. Sitting down heavily, the teacher took her head into her hands. She could not stop the onslaught of emotions that were washing over her in brutal, relentless waves. Was she going crazy? This tearing feeling was insufferable. She needed to calm down. She needed to take stock of the situation. She closed her eyes and exhaled softly.

*I need to be honest with myself*, she thought. The inevitable conclusion was right there, at the tip of her fingers and she decided she needed to face it at last. She did not just have feelings for Manuela; vague, platonic, motherly feelings. Beyond all morals and decency, she loved her. She already knew that matters of love were often unfair and cruel, and thus, she did not feel particularly mortified or responsible for it. Manuela was not yet capable of making her own choices. Of course, if she were to confess tomorrow, the girl would probably follow her without hesitation, but she had no right to expose her to such burden.

She needed to protect Manuela, but she did not know for sure from what, and from whom.

# 7. Chpater 7

After coming to terms with her love for Manuela and the subsequent realisation that she needed to hide it from her and from everyone, Elisabeth decided to go out of her way to avoid the girl, all the while making sure the distance was not too obvious. Progressively, she started treating Manuela exactly like the others; in all fairness but without any particular extra attention. Manuela needed to understand she had not lost any sort of value, but that the person in front of her was a teacher, not someone she was allowed to court. This was for Manuela's own good and perhaps hers, as well.

The changes were subtle and gradual; but as expected, Manuela soon started realising something was off, and was growing more and more frustrated with this lack of interaction. It was obvious from the way she would watch her teacher's every move longingly, or try to get her attention, and huff in indignation when it went -or seemed to go- unnoticed. Every morning before entering the classroom, Elisabeth had to remind herself that she was not to smile affectionately at Manuela, or brush her hand slightly when handing her a piece of paper. In truth, she desired nothing else than to assure the girl that she was not, indeed, indifferent to her at all. Sometimes, when she caught a glimpse of her brooding at her desk, with her mouth slightly pursed to the side and her shoulders slumped, she felt so overwhelmed with tenderness that she was almost ready to abandon her plight. But she had to remain strong and resolute. This time, she would not bend.

On one mid-December evening, after a particularly tiring day, Elisabeth dismissed class just after the bell rang. She was planning on working in the classroom for a while and then head back home as quickly as possible. For some reason, she preferred rereading her lessons or marking copies at school than at her house, which she considered her own oasis of calm. Feeling the beginning of a headache appear, she rubbed her pulsing temples with one hand and with the other, set the first copy in front of her. She had just started going over Wolzogen's paper when she heard a creaking sound

originating from the middle of the room. Lifting her gaze from the copy, she almost jumped out of her skin when she realised what had caused the sound. Manuela was still here, sitting at her desk and looking at her silently.

“Meinhardis! What on Earth are you still doing here?” the teacher gasped with her hand pressed to her chest in shock.

Manuela quickly extracted herself from behind the desk and came to the board.

“Well? Are you looking for a yearlong detention? Answer me!”

Fräulein von Bernburg flinched at her own cold, unforgiving voice. The girl looked at her with watery eyes, obviously frightened and ashamed. It took all her willpower to maintain a straight face, but the student had no business being here and... She just couldn’t afford the temptation of being alone in a room with her.

“I was going to wipe the board,” Manuela finally murmured and, taking hold of the brush on Fräulein von Bernburg’s desk, proceeded to do just that.

Elisabeth turned on her seat and watched her, dumbfounded, as she wiped the board energetically as if it was the most natural thing in the world. For a moment, she was at a loss for words, her gaze fixed on the braided hair swinging from left to right with each move. Quickly enough though, she rose from her chair and, feeling uncharacteristic anger rise in her chest, went to Manuela’s side with wide eyes.

“Meinhardis, you will stop this insolent behaviour immediately or so help me…”

“I am only wiping the board, Fräulein von Bernburg,” Manuela said without looking at her.

“Are you answering back now? If you wanted to wipe the board, you

would have done it at once after class and be back to the dormitory already," Elisabeth snarled, her tone loud and menacing.

Sighing, Manuela lowered her hand and turned to the teacher with careful, measured moves. Elisabeth had not been aware of just how close they were until that moment, and she took an automatic step back at the realisation. It was a clear contradiction to the posture of authority she was trying to assume, but she was too unsure of her own reactions to take a chance.

"At least you look at me when you are cross," Manuela pointed out, and she laughed a dry, humourless laugh. She looked every bit a disillusioned grown-up woman at that moment, and Elisabeth wanted to kiss her frown away.

"Be careful, Meinhardis, you are verging on insolence –dangerously so…"she said instead, hoping to sound convincing.

Ignoring her, Manuela dropped the brush back on the desk with a loud thud and small, sad smile made her lips curl slightly upwards.

"I was so happy these past few weeks… Every time you came to class, I could feel you were happy to see me too. You were always smiling at me. Even when you weren't smiling with your mouth, you were smiling with your eyes, and I knew it was only for me," the girl said softly, gazing into space as if remembering a very, very distant memory "Now, you won't even look at me. And when you do, it's like you no longer see me…"

Elisabeth could feel the tension building a little more with each word Manuela was breathing. She shivered in fear and, maybe, in anticipation, but she didn't dare think about it.

"What are you talking about? Go back to your classmates, now!" she snapped hastily. She probably sounded hysterical, but the urge to distance herself from Manuela was all she could focus on.

Manuela did not answer but kept studying her intently. Her apparent

calm was a striking contrast to Elisabeth's inner turmoil, and she would have deemed it insolent in any other circumstances. Now, however, she was hypnotised by the blue orbs searching hers, probing her very soul.

"Your eyes," Manuela whispered, taking an almost imperceptible step forward. "How have I never noticed before… how lovely they are. How mysterious," she added huskily.

Elisabeth stood petrified as she observed Manuela inch inevitably, agonisingly towards her. It was like watching a train wreck in slow motion. Her gaze lowered to the girl's plump, pink lips. They were slightly parted and she was breathing hard, audibly. It was obvious now, what was going to happen. Manuela wanted to kiss her. And to her horror, she wanted it just as much. Her resolve seemed to crumble altogether as Manuela kept advancing towards her, all rosy cheeks and dilated pupils and it was suddenly as if nothing else mattered in the world. The desire she was experiencing at this moment was unspeakable. She felt liquid heat spread in her lower belly, like an inexorable lava flow, and suddenly, she was terrified, aching, desperate for the soft touch of Manuela's mouth against hers. She was dying for it…

Brusquely, the quiet of the room was disturbed by a sharp, vicious sound. Both looked at the other with the same air of surprise and incomprehension, and only when Fräulein von Bernburg saw Manuela's eyes fill with tears and a trembling hand reach up to cover her already throbbing cheek did she realise what had happened. She had just slapped the girl. She lifted her hand automatically in an attempt for a comforting gesture, an apology, anything that would convey the utter consternation she was suddenly filled with.

"Manuela…" she said in a strangled plea.

With eyes wide, the girl took three quick steps away from her teacher, hitting the desk in the process and uttered the words "I am sorry," before dashing out of the room.

# 8. Chapter 8

Elisabeth stood paralysed on the spot, shocked beyond comprehension. Her head was still buzzing from the headache and she gasped for air, pressing a hand to her chest to control her breathing. What had she done? Confusion quickly gave way to a gut-wrenching feeling, an obscure mix of culpability, pain and of profound sadness; and in an instant, she was running in the hallway in a frantic search for the girl.

There was no trace of her in the corridors and she immediately paled as she reached the staircase… Would Manuela ever consider…? Craning her neck, she gripped the balustrade, scanning the staircase warily as a terrible memory assaulted her. Fortunately, she quickly realised that the staircase was empty, and she exhaled in relief. Manuela had probably gone back to the dormitory by now. Pursing her lips, Elisabeth considered what to do next. It would be resolutely risky to properly apologise to Manuela with curious young women watching them, but at that moment, making sure Manuela was alright was her only priority. She didn't bother knocking and entered the room quietly, unnoticed by the girls for now. A quick glimpse told her the one she was looking for was not here. Some of the students were reading on their beds, while two others were in a deep conversation, with their back turned to the door. When she heard what it was about, Elisabeth stopped dead in her tracks.

"I can't fit in this stupid uniform anymore! I have to change sizes every six months," a voice she recognised as Wolzogen's whined.

"I keep telling you. The problem comes from your tits. They're huge – no offence," was Kerpenbach's answer.

"Well, well… Did you learn such words in etiquette class?" Elisabeth said sternly from the door. She heard surprised gasps and a dozen pairs of panic-struck eyes turned to her in alarm. All girls rose from their beds and stood awkwardly, obviously unprepared for this impromptu visit. She had to repress a chuckle at Wolzogen and Kerpenbach's equally flushed cheeks.

“Fräulein von Bernburg…” Wolzogen started pleadingly, unable to look at the teacher.

“Save it, both of you,” Fräulein von Bernburg cut, raising a hand to stop the girl’s explanation. “Just make sure none of this foul talk comes to my ears ever again.” Then, she cleared her throat. “I merely wanted to come and say good evening to you before heading out… Are you all present?” she asked in the most indifferent tone she could muster.

“Yes, Fräulein von Bernburg!” Rackow immediately answered with a booming voice.

“Actually, Manuela is not here yet,” Kleist ventured. “She said she would stay behind to wipe the board… I thought you would have run into her,” she added, and looked pointedly at the teacher, almost in defiance.

*Kleist… So you know.*

At the same moment, the door flew open, making Fräulein von Bernburg spin around. Manuela stood uncertainly in the doorway, her hand gripping the doorknob as if she was ready to run back to where she just came from. She looked slightly dishevelled and her eyes were puffy. Without surprise, the angry red mark was still plainly visible on her cheek, and Elisabeth flinched at the sight.

“Manuela, what happened?” Westhagen asked in concern, running to inspect the girl’s appearance.

“I just missed a step while running down the stairs and fell down. It’s nothing,” she replied with a tight-lipped smile, purposefully avoiding the teacher’s gaze. “Fräulein von Bernburg,” she said curtly as she passed by her, before bowing somewhat exaggeratingly.

Against her better judgement, the teacher approached the girl, her eyes wary and questioning. “Are you alright?” she asked, trying to maintain the concern in her voice to a minimum.

“It’s nothing at all,” Manuela assured again, and her smile turned

almost painful, making Elisabeth's heart clench in her chest.

She had seen countless girls cry and had soothed more grieves than she could recall, but seeing Manuela cry was simply unbearable. And this time again, she was responsible for those tears. Without thinking, she boldly reached for the bruised cheek and proceeded to gently brush the skin with the tip of her fingers. Then, she cupped the girl's soft face in her hands and, ignoring the curious gazes upon them, she placed a chaste kiss on Manuela's forehead, like those she used to bestow upon the girls before bedtime, in what appeared to be a lifetime ago.

"Go freshen up before dinner," she whispered with one last stroke against the burning cheek, before backing away. "Good evening, children. I will see you in class tomorrow," she said, louder this time, and barely glanced at the group of wide-mouthed girls as she left the room.

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This evening at the refectory, Manuela barely ate and remained silent, with her head lowered down. Even Yvette, who was desperate to understand what was bothering her friend, had finally given up and left her alone with her thoughts. Pushing her food around her plate, Manuela could not help but replay the events of the evening in her head. Her cheek had stopped hurting hours ago, but her ego was still painfully bruised. She felt utterly stupid and ashamed. And what had she hoped for, exactly? That her love would be returned? That a beautiful, intelligent woman like Fräulein von Bernburg would be interested in a pitiful kid like her, a girl at that, who had absolutely nothing to offer?

*I am just your teacher, nothing else. Nothing else!* The words she had heard two years ago still echoed in her head, and they were now feeling clearer and more meaningful than ever. Although there were times she could swear the older woman returned her feelings, the minute after she was back to being cold and aloof. It was confusing

and frustrating, but there was always something she would hang on to -a glimpse, a smile, a touch, that would make her hope of a secret link between them. But after today, it was clear that Fräulein von Bernburg wanted nothing to do with her and that she had merely been tolerating her misplaced affection all along. She had been nice enough not to report her to Racket, or worse, her aunt. Manuela closed her eyes in shame at the thought. Just because she was not married did not mean Fräulein von Bernburg wanted *her*. And what did she know about her life anyway? She was a teacher here, but outside, she was a woman. A witty charming, gorgeous woman who probably had more suitors than she could even imagine. A terrible thought crossed Manuela's mind. What if Fräulein von Bernburg had someone in her life? It had been two years, after all… Was someone – *a man*- allowed to hold her, kiss her like she so fiercely wanted to? The girl felt her heartbeat quicken as the unmistakable feeling of jealousy invaded her, boiling inside her like acid and she unconsciously balled her fists in rage.

Well, if she wanted distance, Manuela would give it to her. Lifting her chin resolutely, she made a decision: from then on, she would keep her feelings for the teacher at bay, and pretend to be unaffected. Then perhaps, with time, these feelings would subside and eventually disappear altogether and she could finally have a chance to be normal. *It is better this way*, she thought with newfound confidence.

"So I see nothing has changed," came a voice just behind her. "You're still her favourite."

It was Treskow, who was shooting daggers at her with her eyes. Manuela remained silent for a while, simply eyeing the blonde girl in front of her. Alexandra was often insufferable, vile and unfair but in the end, Manuela understood it was only out of envy and despair. She was pathetic, in the end, and she herself was now as pathetic as her.

"You're only hurting yourself and it's not worth it. It's time for you to move on, Treskow. For all of us," she said, before exiting the room and leaving the girl behind with a baffled look on her face.

# 9. Chapter 9

**Summary for the Chapter:**

Small one, I know, but let's call it a filler ;)

The next morning, Fräulein von Bernburg entered the classroom almost reluctantly, guilt and anxiety knotting her stomach. She had barely slept that night, still agitated by the unforgivable gesture she had had towards Manuela. Shutting the door behind her, she walked to the dais and glanced at the students who were dutifully standing beside their desks, waiting for the permission to sit down. As always, all the girls were looking at her with this usual mix of admiration and yearning. All, except one. For the first time since she had met Manuela, she could not feel her eyes on her. Instead, they were firmly focused on a point just behind her on the board, although not *on her*. She suddenly felt so empty, so cold that she glanced at the windows, certain someone must have left them open. Why would she shiver in such fashion otherwise? But as it appeared they were perfectly shut, she blanched and wrapped her arms around herself, before she slowly made her way back to the desk.

“Sit down,” she demanded, her tone firm and soft at the same time. Usually this tone only would have earned her a longing, adoring gaze from Manuela. Surely, she would be looking her way, any minute now. She studied the blank, unreadable face closely, hoping to catch her eyes, but nothing came. Manuela did not budge and kept her eyes stubbornly locked on the board as she obeyed the command and sat down with the others. Sighing in frustration, Elisabeth cleared her throat and, smoothing the pages of the book in front of her, started her lesson on Symbolism.

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At the end of the course, Elisabeth had to accept the painful truth; Manuela was purposefully avoiding her. Not once had she looked her way. She was obviously punishing her for the slap and this conclusion hurt more than she was willing to admit. When the bell

rang, she quickly stood up before any of the students could leave the room and held the brush to the board in front of her expectantly.

“Someone to wipe the board, please?” she asked a little too loudly as Manuela passed by her desk. Seeing the girl slow down her pace and turn slightly towards her in hesitation almost brought a smile to her face, but at the same moment, Treskow all but jumped in front of her and took the brush in her hands enthusiastically.

“I’ll do it, Fräulein von Bernburg,” she said.

Following Manuela with her eyes as she left the room, Elisabeth nodded absentmindedly. “Alright, Treskow, thank you.”

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When she got to bed that evening, Elisabeth tried to rationalise. She knew she needed to be consistent. She had no right to be so upset. After all, she had been the one to encourage distance between them. She had tried to keep Manuela away, and her last attempt at rejection, although brutal and involuntary, had obviously been successful. She knew it was for the best; the price to pay for both their safety. Howbeit now, she was no longer convinced the situation satisfied her all that much. Seeing Manuela so detached was stirring an unfathomable sensation of melancholy and emptiness within her. In truth, she was craving Manuela’s affection as much as the girl craved hers, to the extent that it was physically painful.

Sighing deeply, she lit the oil lamp on her bedside table and sat up in bed. Putting a hand over her mouth, she seemed to hesitate for a moment before caving in, and she opened the bedside drawer. Carefully, almost reverently, she took out a small, brown leather notebook and smiled at it, a watery but somewhat relieved smile. She studied the cover for a while, letting her fingers run over it softly, and then she pressed it to her heart, closing her eyes in agony. Nothing could have prepared Elisabeth for the storm of emotions that rose within her, but when the tears came, she let them run freely down her cheeks while still holding the diary close to her. She could not tell how long she stayed this way, but she still held onto it for

long, long after her tears had subsided. Finally, when she felt calm and drained, she lifted the notebook to her mouth, pressed a soft kiss to the cover, and put it back in the drawer with the same meticulous care. It was the closest thing to Manuela she possessed, and she had kept it religiously all those years. But the one thing she had never done was to open it, and read through it. The very thought horrified her. All those secrets, those private reflections of Manuela, about her life, her past, and maybe her feelings towards her were not hers to read, and even though the girl had given her the diary knowingly, going through it would have felt like profaning something very special and pure. And deep, deep down, Elisabeth held onto the hope that one day, Manuela would tell her all of these secrets herself.

Knowing she would probably get no sleep at all that night again, she pushed back the covers and padded down the stairs with the lamp in her hand. She sat in front of the easel and, listening to the visceral inspiration awakened by her beloved muse, she started painting.

# 10. Chapter 10

The same thing went on for a week, with Manuela categorically refusing to acknowledge Elisabeth, and Elisabeth growing more and more frustrated with each passing day. Every time she asked the girl a question, the student would obediently stand up and answer without hesitation, but she would not spare her a single glance. Fräulein von Bernburg was conscious that her position as a teacher would absolutely grant her the right to scold Manuela for her openly disrespectful attitude. Yet, she knew all too well the reason behind the girl's behaviour, and she also knew she was responsible for it. This went beyond all considerations of a teacher's right to discipline their student. Despite her best efforts, she no longer considered Manuela a mere student and conversely, Manuela did not seem to fear her authority anymore. Their relationship had effectively shifted into something else she could not quite identify the nature of yet, but it was there, and she knew it would never go back to the way it was.

On a Saturday night, she decided to take matters into her own hands and asked that Manuela stayed behind after class. Seeing Kleist hover hesitatingly in the doorway as the others were leaving the room, she dismissed her with an impatient nod towards the door. "Thank you, Kleist, you may leave."

The girl did a quick curtsey and went straight to the door, shutting it behind her.

Manuela, now alone in the room with her teacher, stood awkwardly by the board with her head low.

"Are you planning on continuing this little game for long?" she asked sharply.

At the words, the girl lifted her head in alarm and fleetingly, their eyes met before she lowered her head again dramatically. "A game, Fräulein von Bernburg? I'm not playing games."

Elisabeth wanted to be angry at Manuela, but she found her almost

comical resolve all too endearing. Slowly, she cupped the girl's face in her hands, hoping it would be enough to make her look her way. Again, the stubborn girl went out of her way to avoid eye contact, this time fixing the ceiling as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Manuela…" the teacher coaxed in a soft whisper. She could feel Manuela's determination slowly crumble as the girl inhaled and closed her eyes forcefully.

Elisabeth felt her strong jaw clench under her fingertips and she started caressing the soft skin of Manuela's chin with her thumb softly, almost curiously. Deep down, of course, she knew she was not playing fair and her touch was on the verge of inappropriate, but she felt a pull towards Manuela, something primal and instinctive making her unable to take a step back.

"Manuela, look at me," she urged again, her voice only a whisper.

"No," the student choked, and the teacher could see tears forming from under her closed eyelids.

"Please."

Finally, Manuela opened her eyes and for the first time in days, allowed their gazes to meet. Elisabeth let go of the breath she had not realised she was holding and smiled sincerely at the girl in front of her, still caressing her jaw and cheeks gently. Without a word, she wiped the frustrated tears away.

"I know you are upset that I slapped you. You have every right to be…," she admitted. Then, with a sigh, she added, "I am deeply sorry that I hurt you like this."

Manuela seemed to think for a moment. "I deserved the correction. If anything, I should be the one asking for forgiveness, for what I did to you. I understand it now. I promise this will never happen again," she finally said with disconcerting calm.

An unexpected sadness washed over Elisabeth upon hearing the words, although she should have felt relieved. Manuela was finally coming to her senses and now, she was the one being unreasonable. Trying to hide her disappointment, Elisabeth let go of the girl's face and attempted to smile.

"Good, Manuela. Good. You must understand that it is not right for you to expect… such things from me. I am glad you are finally coming to terms with that." *Liar*, she thought to herself. "You have to stop this nonsense. You need to focus on what is really important; learning, obeying and nothing else. Remember that you will not be here forever. You may be upset now, but in a year or so, you will be gone and none of this will matter to you any longer," she said, motioning vaguely at the room, or maybe at the space between them.

Although the teacher had tried to sound as convincing as possible, her heart was bursting in pieces at the very idea Manuela would, indeed, come to forget about her. The girl, however, wanted to shout, to throw herself at the other woman's feet and assure her that she would never let her slip from her memory, not in a million years. But instead, she clutched her fists and gave a constrained nod of acknowledgement.

"Go now."

Without another word, Manuela turned on her heels and left the teacher alone, none of them aware of how terribly the other was hurting at this very moment.

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"So… What did Fraülein von Bernburg want to talk about?" asked Kleist during dinner. She had tried to contain her curiosity, but enough was enough.

"Nothing," the chestnut-haired girl replied automatically.

Huffing in exasperation, Yvette tugged Manuela closer. "I thought we

were best friends, Manuela. You never tell me anything," she hissed.

Manuela threw a quick look around to make sure no one else was listening and nodded in a silent concession. Yvette deserved to know, and most importantly, she wanted to tell her.

"She just said… that I shouldn't expect anything from her…" Already, she could feel her cheeks burn in embarrassment as she saw Yvette's air of confusion.

"What exactly did she think you were expecting?" she asked with a perplexed frown.

Manuela took a deep breath and, bringing her voice to an even lower level, she admitted her misconduct.

"I tried to kiss her last week."

There was a beat, a split second of incomprehension. Then, as the significance of her friend's admission dawned on her, Kleist slapped a hand over her mouth in shock.

"Oh Manuela, no."

"Yes, yes. I know," Manuela muttered angrily as her cheeks turned an even darker shade of red. "You cannot tell anyone. I'm serious, Yvette."

Still overwhelmed by what she had just heard, Kleist shook her head vigorously. "Of course, you can trust me."

"Thank you," the other girl mumbled.

"But… I have to know. How did it all happen?"

"It doesn't matter. I was stupid and she rejected me. Of course, she did. How could she feel anything for me?"

Yvette placed a comforting hand on her friend's back. "Fräulein von Bernburg loves you very much, Manuela. Why would you think any other way?" she asked with a concerned frown.

“But don’t you see? She loves me as she loves anyone here, in the same way that she loves you, or Westhagen, or Rackow. But I? I am *in love* with her!” Manuela almost shouted, slamming her hand on the table. Some girls around stopped their conversations and turned to her in alarm.

“Manuela!” Yvette scolded and sent a quick smile at her classmates to reassure them, before grabbing the other girl by the arm.

“Come on, let’s walk to the dormitory together.”

They strolled in silence through the corridors with their arms linked, both unsure of how to approach the other. Finally, Manuela took the first step as she stopped walking and forced Yvette to turn towards her in the same movement.

“I am sorry for snapping at you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” her friend dismissed with a wave of her hand. “As for the rest… I don’t really know what to say. But deep down, I think you know Fräulein von Bernburg only wants what is best for you.”

Sighing audibly, Manuela had to concede that her friend was right. She also wanted the best for Fräulein von Bernburg and pursuing her, whether she returned her feelings or not, would only cause her trouble. But it did not hurt any less.

## 11. Chapter 11

The following weeks were relatively quiet and uneventful. Manuela had resolved to behave studiously and to interact as normally as she could with her teacher, and Elisabeth had started convincing herself that things would go back to normal, eventually. Of course, their mutual feelings remained unchanged. In class, they still found it painfully hard to tear their eyes away from each other. At night, they both imagined the other's face as they drifted to sleep. The tension was still there, but they had reached a sort of unspoken agreement to leave things be, and on the outside at least, they were fairly successful at keeping their emotions in check. It was certainly not ideal, but both found this balance acceptable.

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Elisabeth had been looking forward to Christmas, not because she was particularly thrilled by the celebrations to come, but because she felt she deserved a few days of rest. All the girls would be back in their respective families, and they would certainly come back in higher spirits after this little vacation.

Snow had fallen heavily on Christmas Eve, and when she opened the blinds the next morning, the teacher was delighted to see a bright blue sky illuminating the thick mantle of white as far as the eye could see. Inhaling deeply in delight, Elisabeth closed her eyes and let the pale winter sun warm her skin. For the first time in weeks, she felt relaxed, and light-hearted. As she opened her eyes again, she decided it was the perfect moment to go for a walk and maybe do a sketch or two. She ate a quick breakfast and donned a dark-blue woollen dress. As she went to collect her pastels and sketchbook, she realised they were nowhere to be found. With a defeated groan, she proceeded to rummage around the room in search of the misplaced items, but after a few minutes of unfruitful exploration, she realised she had probably forgotten them at school in her briefcase. Huffing in disappointment, Elisabeth considered running to town before she remembered all

shops would certainly be closed on Christmas day. Tapping her lips with her index finger in reflection, she wondered if she should go back to retrieve it, or simply make other plans for the day. Looking one last time through the window longingly, she came to the conclusion that it would simply be a shame not to make the most of such a beautiful and inspiring day.

Thirty minutes later, she was at the school's gates. Entering the park, she remarked a few footsteps marking the fresh snow. *Of course*, she thought. The janitor, the cooks, the maids, and maybe other people who worked at school were probably still around. Some people had no family to celebrate Christmas with. In a sense, it was her case as well, but she did not feel melancholic in the least at the idea. She would celebrate it in her own way, and it would be glorious, she thought, a light smile playing on her lips as she made her way towards the imposing building. She hastened up the stone stairs and opened the entrance door. As soon as she entered the main hall, however she was startled by a tall silhouette descending the staircase, and she stopped all movements abruptly. Shock was quickly replaced by fear when she realised it was a man. A man she had never seen before.

"Who are you? And what on earth are you doing here?" she asked loudly, hoping to sound intimidating in spite of the panic quickly spearing in the pit of her stomach.

The man looked at her with wide eyes and quickly ran down the last steps so he could be at her level. Elisabeth remarked his soldier attire, and her frown deepened.

"Oh! I am so, so sorry, ma'am! I can explain my presence here!" he pleaded with his hands held in front of him in a pacifying gesture.

She eyed him suspiciously and after a while, she decided he did not look like a menace after all. In fact, up close, with his flushed cheeks, his imploring grey eyes, and despite the thin moustache above his lip, he looked very young, and very much afraid. Very familiar too.

"Well? I am listening," the teacher urged, crossing her arms sternly as

she regained some confidence.

“I came to pay a short visit to my sister… I know it is unexpected and probably unusual for a man to be here. But I did send a letter!” he said, somewhat defensively.

“To which I assume you did not receive an answer, for I doubt our current headmistress would have allowed you here if she knew,” Elisabeth replied sharply. Then, when she saw him lower his eyes like a scolded child, she softened. “What is your sister doing here? All girls are supposed to be back with their families for Christmas.”

He looked at her again and his face broke into a slight, sad smile, which again, reminded her of something. Or someone.

“Our… family is not able to welcome her for the holiday. I took advantage of my day of leave to visit her, and give her a small present.”

Elisabeth had to admit this young man was kind and dutiful.

“This is very considerate of you, unfortunately I’m afraid your presence here could be a source of trouble if someone was to find out about it- someone other than me,” she said firmly, but her eyes were indulgent.

“Of course, I was just leaving. Thank you so very much for your discretion,” he said, and this time, his smile was warm and sincere. Suddenly, something seemed to cross his mind and his eyes widened before he lightly slapped his forehead. “How silly of me, I didn’t even introduce myself properly. I am Bertram von Meinhardis. Pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” he said and bowing respectfully, and held out his hand.

The name made Elisabeth’s head spin and for a split second, she even thought she had misheard. But she had not. This young man was Manuela’s brother. Manuela was alone on Christmas day. Manuela was *here*. Looking at the still ignored hand held out in front of her,

Elisabeth finally grabbed it, and gave it a firm, hurried shake before realising it.

“Likewise. I am Fräulein von Bernburg, one of Manuela’s teachers.”

The look of awe that passed across the young man’s face was almost amusing, but the deferent bow that followed was downright ludicrous, and when he took her hand again and kissed it, Elisabeth had to roll her eyes. Apparently, theatricality ran in the family, she thought fondly.

“Oh, Fräulein von Bernburg, it is such an honour to meet you. My sister told me so much about you in her letters and again today. Really, you seem to be all she can talk about,” he said enthusiastically.

“Thank you very much, Herr von Meinhardis. Manuela is a very brilliant student indeed. You can be proud of her,” she said, trying to sound professional although she felt absolutely elated by this admission.

“I am. Life has been very hard on her but she’s happy now, with you around. Thank you for everything you are doing for her.”

Elisabeth partially turned away from the praising young man, hoping to hide the blush spreading along her cheeks and neck. She cleared her throat and smiled politely.

“Well, it was very nice of you to visit your sister for Christmas.”

“It is also her birthday. I just could not bear imagining her alone, today of all days,” he admitted. He did not expect the look of consternation on the teacher’s face. She seemed to be at a loss for words, and he felt quite confused himself.

“I should go, now. Again, it was lovely meeting you, Fräulein von Bernburg. Goodbye,” he said with a polite bob, and turned on his heels.

“Yes, goodbye,” Elisabeth let out absentmindedly at the now empty hallway.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> I liked the idea of Manuela being born on Christmas, as per Christa Winsloe's novel, and I took the liberty of using it here as well because I thought it was just perfect. Including her brother also felt really important although it is not mentionned in the movie whether or not she has siblings.

## 12. Chapter 12

Fräulein von Bernburg walked resolutely to the teachers' room and as expected, found her briefcase in a corner, exactly where she had left it. As she tucked it safely under her arm and left the room, she thought it really was the simplest thing in the world. The day was still young, and all she needed now was to walk down the stairs and find a lovely spot near the lake where she could draw, just as planned from the very beginning. There was decisively no reason for her to meander around the corridors. None at all. But as she walked the last few steps and heard the distinctive notes of a Chopin waltz emanating from the refectory, Elisabeth could not refrain from following the sound, as if entranced. Pushing the door open, she immediately caught sight of Manuela, who had her back turned to her, and was hitting the keys delicately, then intensely, and then softly again. The teacher could not believe the virtuosity and the passion she was witnessing. This was a side from Manuela she had never seen. The sheer intimacy of the scene was suddenly almost too much to take, and Elisabeth felt it was practically wrong for her to be here. But she was paralysed; she just could not leave. Not when she was so enthralled by the music, and even more so by how much it seemed to animate Manuela. For a long while, then, she just stood there in the doorway, listening to the melody emanating from the corner of the room, and without even realising, she closed her eyes. At some point, she heard Manuela hit a wrong note, which was quickly followed by a curse, and she reopened her eyes in stupefaction. She knew she had the choice to leave quietly, or to make a move towards the girl in yet another show of contradiction with her own principles. She knew what the right thing to do was, but unsurprisingly, her heart took over once again. She cleared her throat pointedly and waited for Manuela to turn around.

In the blink of an eye, the girl jumped up from the piano bench and spun around with wide eyes.

"Fräulein… von Bernburg!" she panted, flushed and positively dumbstruck.

"What a shame that such a gifted pianist has the mouth of a sailor,"

the older woman said sternly, fighting hard against the smile that threatened to appear.

“I... I wasn’t aware anyone was here,” she started by way of explanation.

Fraülein von Bernburg waved dismissively and took a few steps closer.

“I’ll let it pass. After all, today is a special day,” the teacher said cryptically.

Manuela frowned, then seemed to understand what the other woman was referring to and nodded quickly.

“It is, yes. But… aren’t you celebrating Christmas with your relatives, Fräulein von Bernburg?” she asked in sudden concern.

A shadow seemed to cross the teacher’s face, but she quickly shook her head. She didn’t reply, and instead, drew even closer to Manuela and crossed her arms in front of her. Her lips were turned upwards in an intriguing smile, and it made Manuela’s heartbeat quicken perceptibly.

“I didn’t know today was your birthday.”

The look of astonishment on the girl’s face was priceless.

“How…?” she started and then, after a beat, it seemed to dawn on her. “You saw my brother, didn’t you?”

“I ran into him just as he was leaving. And don’t frown… I won’t tell anyone. But he his lucky it was me he encountered, and not anyone else,” Fräulein von Bernburg's voice was firm, but laced with benevolence.

Manuela nodded and sent her a grateful smile. Elisabeth knew it was the perfect moment for her to leave.

“Why didn’t you tell me anything?” she asked instead.

“Why would I have? You are just my teacher, after all. I don’t know when your birthday is,” the girl snapped back, and quickly shut her mouth as she realised the audacity of her words.

The teacher was momentarily taken aback and remained silent, unsure of how to answer. She knew she should have disciplined the girl straight away for such a show of insolence, but Manuela was not wrong. If they were to have an appropriately distant relationship, why would they ever share intimate details like this?

“Well, when is it?” Manuela pressed again daringly.

The question pulled Elisabeth out of her musings, and she blinked in confusion. “When is what?” she asked.

“Your birthday. When is it?”

Again, the older woman remained quiet for a moment.

“On June 23,” she replied out of the blue and immediately shut her eyes, mortified by her own weakness.

Manuela appeared stunned for a moment, probably because she was not expecting such a straight-forward answer, but it was quickly replaced by a small, knowing smirk. The glint of self-satisfaction in her eyes was unmistakable.

“I will keep this in mind,” she said and Elisabeth did not doubt it for a second.

“What are you doing here on a day like this?” she asked, trying to regain control of the conversation.

“I received a letter from my aunt a few days ago. She said she was

indisposed and that I could not come back to her house for Christmas break because of that. I had no choice but to stay here," Manuela replied with an even tone. "But it's not terrible at all," she added quickly as she saw her teacher's brow knit in reprobation. "I have the whole dormitory to myself, I can sleep late, practise the piano as I please… It still feels like holidays to me. My brother even came by… as you know."

The teacher smiled sadly and looked down for a moment, hiding her clenched fists behind her back. How could this despicable woman treat Manuela so dreadfully? It was unacceptable enough to leave the girl alone for Christmas, but to know it was her birthday as well was even more appalling. Manuela deserved to feel precious and loved, and she was probably feeling just the opposite today. Suddenly, nothing felt more important than to make sure Manuela was happy on her special day. Looking at the wide, pale-blue orbs she had come to love so much, she decided she no longer cared about morals, ethics, or protocol. At least not today. She wanted to do something nice for the girl, and neither Racket nor Manuela's aunt would have their say in it.

"Do you have any comfortable and warm clothes?" Fräulein von Bernburg asked abruptly.

Manuela frowned slightly, apparently thinking really hard of a suitable answer although unsure of why the teacher was asking in the first place.

"My gymnastics attire is practical, and warm enough," she finally ventured, as she thought about the woollen tights and knickerbockers she wore for physical education.

Elisabeth smiled back and clapped her hands in front of her decidedly.

"Then go get changed and meet me here in 10 minutes. We are going ice-skating!"

# 13. Chapter 13

They made a quick stop at Fraülein von Bernburg's house to retrieve a pair of skates for them both in the hope something would fit Manuela. The teacher had been hesitant to let the girl in at first, conscious that allowing her into her home would effectively shatter the last bit of boundaries existing between them. Not to mention the countless paintings of the girl that were scattered across the house... She had finally settled for ordering Manuela to stay in the hallway while she busied herself with gathering their equipment.

Manuela complied without batting an eye, and obediently waited for her by the door. She felt privileged enough to be allowed into the house and was hesitant to even make a move in fear of disturbing anything in the perfect environment. However, she was looking around eagerly as if she wanted to memorize everything. She smiled warmly at the elegant shoes tucked under the white wooden bench, at the vase with freshly cut flowers adorning a small table in the corner. Everything felt so cosy, so intimate, so exactly Elisabeth von Bernburg. Turning on her heels, she noticed a grey cloak draped over the coat rack next to the door and without thinking, she took a hold of the material. She pushed her faced into the warm fabric and inhaled deeply, letting the delightful, reassuring smell of the woman she loved envelop her.

Upon hearing footsteps in the stairway a few seconds later, she quickly let go of the clothing and squeezed her burning cheeks with her hands. Just as she was turning around, her attention was drawn to a painting of a beautiful country landscape. The colours were pale and the contours vaporous, giving off an almost ethereal luminosity to the picture. Manuela had never seen anything quite like this and immediately felt drawn to it. Curious, she drew closer to look for a signature at the bottom of the painting and almost gasped when she read the initials. At this moment Fraülein von Bernburg appeared in the hallway with a pair of skates in each hand.

"Do you paint?" Manuela asked without preamble, her eyes still fixed on the canvas.

Unsettled at first, the older woman followed the girl's gaze and gave a short nod upon realising what it was about.

“We all have our little hidden talents, I suppose,” she said pointedly.

Manuela turned to her, her eyes full of admiration. “It is absolutely breath-taking.”

Embarrassed and flattered at the same time, Elisabeth tried to wave off the compliment and motioned for the shoes in her hands.

"Come on, let’s see if these fit you. We don’t want to waste the whole day here, do we?"

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Elisabeth knew it was crazy. Irresponsible even. But as she turned and caught a glimpse of Manuela giggling behind her, her cheeks reddened by the cold as she struggled not to slip on the iced surface, she could not find an ounce of guilt or regret within her.

They were now gliding effortlessly around the lake together, skating past happy families and young people, and laughing as the sun shone bright and comforting over them. It was a beautiful, beautiful day. Manuela was still in awe and could not quite believe what was happening. She was ice skating with her darling Fräulein von Bernburg on her birthday. She could not remember a time she had felt this happy and fulfilled.

“It's been a while since I last skated. I was afraid I wouldn’t remember,” the girl admitted when they slowed down their pace, and leant over the wooden railing boarding the lake in order to get a little rest.

Taking off her leather gloves and rubbing her hands together, Fräulein von Bernburg shot the girl a playful look. “Yes, I could tell.”

Feigning indignation, Manuela crossed her arms in front of her chest exaggeratingly, which made the other woman burst in laughter. It was as unexpected as it was exquisite, and for a moment, Manuela stood hypnotized by the enchanting vision before her. Elisabeth's head was titled back as she laughed, and up close, Manuela could see the charming dimples adorning the smooth skin of her cheeks. Not that the girl had ever doubted it, but she was now absolutely convinced that Elisabeth von Bernburg was a goddess. *Oh!* How she loved her. She felt her chest swell with adoration, and suddenly, she wanted to throw herself at the woman's feet, to profess her undying love for her. This would probably be a stupid thing to do, however. After all, today was the perfect opportunity to show Fräulein von Bernburg how mature she had gotten.

"You look very graceful on the ice," the girl said, her tone deliberately light as looked away from the woman.

Elisabeth's smile faltered a little.

"I used to go ice-skating with my father. He was very gifted," she admitted after a moment, and her voice, laced with melancholy, seemed to linger in the air.

Sensing the change in atmosphere, and unwilling to ruin the moment; Manuela pushed herself away from the wooden fence.

"Should we go back on the rink?"

Elisabeth happily complied as she followed Manuela to the middle of the lake, and they skated side by side in companionable silence. After a while, Manuela turned to the teacher and pointed at something across the lake.

"I want to race the other side and back here. Do you mind?" she asked.

At Fräulein von Bernburg's nod of agreement, Manuela briskly set forth on the ice, weaving easily around the other skaters. Without really meaning to, Elisabeth craned her neck over the hats and caps

for a better view and she found herself completely enraptured by the vision before her. Seeing her beloved Manuela slide proudly across the ice like a real champion felt unreal. In this attire and with her hair floating freely around her face, she looked so relaxed, so different from the way she did at school, with her usually strict braid and her stern grey blouse. Elisabeth looked at the lithe, yet strong body delightfully displayed before her, and looked, and looked again, unabashedly. As a matter of fact, she could not have torn her gaze away from the shapely legs and the delightful curve of Manuela's back if she'd tried. The vision was enticing and soothing all at the same time. For the first time, Elisabeth was really seeing the person behind Manuela. She was not just the student, not just the projection of a fantasy built over the years on something intangible and forbidden. Like this, Manuela looked independent, yet reachable. Somehow, Elisabeth realised with a silent gasp, it made her love her even more.

By then, the girl had already reached the other bank of the lake and was waving at her enthusiastically. Elisabeth waved back without hesitation. She was probably smiling like a school-girl, but for the first time in a while, she did not care how she looked, or what people would think of her. She was happy. Unreservedly happy. She watched in awe as Manuela started sliding back towards her with an unmistakable air of self-satisfaction, even from where she stood. It was obvious that she liked the attention, and Elisabeth saw no reason to deny her. She clapped her hands in encouragement as she watched the girl accelerate even more, galvanised by her cheers. She was just a few metres away when another skater came out of nowhere and almost collided into her in full speed. Manuela did not seem at all bothered by what had almost happened and swiftly made an about turn to make sure the other person was okay.

She sent a brash smile over to her teacher, and Elisabeth was about to scold her for skating so fast when she felt something slam heavily into her back, knocking the air out of her lungs. Her eyes widened in confusion and as she felt she was starting to lose her balance on the ice, she braced herself for the unavoidable fall. Instead of the cold and brutal impact though, she felt two strong arms promptly grab her by the waist, effectively straightening her up. She automatically wrapped her own arms over the figure in front of her, and her eyes

locked with blue, panic-struck orbs.

“Fräulein von Bernburg! Are you okay?” Manuela enquired, her voice shaking in concern.

“Yes, yes. I was just surprised,” the teacher tried to reason, but her heart was beating fast and without Manuela’s arms around her, she was not sure her knees would not simply give out.

“You! Couldn’t you watch where you were going?” Manuela suddenly yelled towards a blond, shivering boy who was clutching at his arm in apparent pain.

“I... I am sorry. I didn't see her at all,” he argued feebly and Elisabeth understood he must have been the one to bump into her.

“You could have hurt her, you idiot! Open your eyes next time! Get away from here!” the girl said hotly, her arms still protectively locked around the teacher's waist. Her eyes were wild, furious and the muscles in her neck and jaws were visibly strained. Elisabeth should have been rebuked by such a vulgar display but she was absolutely intoxicated by this side of Manuela.

“Manuela… It’s alright,” the older woman said gently as she squeezed her shoulders.

Manuela turned to her and her features instantly softened.

“Are you really okay? He didn’t hurt you, did he?” she asked in concern. Her hands were now roaming freely over the other woman's arms and sides in a seemingly purely appraising, comforting gesture, but the sensations it ignited inside Elisabeth were far from innocent. She gasped involuntarily and pressed her palms on Manuela’s shoulders in a desperate attempt to collect herself.

"Oh!”

“Fräulein von Bernburg?" Manuela asked, her eyebrows knitting in

worry.

“We missed lunch! You must be starving!” the teacher exclaimed, quickly extricating herself from the embrace and pushing away from the alarmed girl. “Come on, I know the perfect place.”

## 14. Chapter 14

Manuela leant back in her chair as she engulfed her last piece of cake with a satisfied groan. They were sitting at a table in a charming little café just across the lake. When asked what she wanted to eat, Manuela had timidly admitted she was craving chocolate cake, and Elisabeth had willingly obliged. It was her birthday, after all.

“How is the cake?” Fräulein von Bernburg asked teasingly as she took a sip of her tea.

“Oh! Sorry, I eat like a pig…” Manuela admitted guiltily.

“It’s alright,” the teacher said with an indulgent smile. Then, pushing her own plate towards the girl, she said, “Here, you need it more than I do.”

“But… aren’t you hungry?” Manuela asked with wide eyes, and for a split second Elisabeth thought she was about to cry.

“Seeing you eat with gusto is enough.” And it was the absolute truth.

Manuela eyed the almost untouched piece of cake for a while, and when she saw the other woman’s encouraging nod, she finally dug in. She closed her eyes in bliss, all too aware that the fork had been in her teacher’s mouth just seconds before.

“Are you sure you don’t want some?” she offered after a while to the teacher who was still looking at her with an amused glint in her eyes.

“No, Manuela. Thank you.”

Manuela did not even try to fight her grin upon hearing the teacher use her name.

“What is it?” the older woman asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Nothing. I just like hearing you call me Manuela.”

“Well… It *is* your name, after all. Finish your plate,” Fräulein von Bernburg said, suddenly tense. Then, realising how harsh she had

sounded, she added, “We can order something else if you’re still hungry afterwards,” hoping it would suffice to avoid the conversation from taking a dangerous turn. Of course, it didn’t. Manuela was no longer paying attention to the cake, and was now fixing her intently.

“You’re very difficult to read,” the girl suddenly let out, making Elisabeth’s eyes widen and some of her tea spill on the tablecloth.

“What does this even mean?” she asked indignantly, making sure to avoid Manuela’s burning gaze as she started wiping the hot liquid away with her napkin.

Manuela looked at her patiently until she could no longer pretend to be busy with something else, and reached out over the table. With great gentleness, she replaced the humid cloth with her own hand, making Fräulein von Bernburg look at her questioningly but to her relief, she did not pull away.

“Please. Don’t get angry. I just want to talk.”

“Why?” the other woman sighed, defeated.

Manuela took a moment to study their joined hands. Fräulein von Bernburg’s hands were fascinating. They were feminine and delicate, and reminded her of women in Renaissance paintings. Her own fingers were long and strong, like a boy’s. She had always felt somewhat insecure about it, but now as her hand was resting in the other woman’s palm, it felt just right. The contrast was striking, and beautiful.

“I have so many things I want to say to you… but I’m always afraid of driving you away,” Manuela said finally.

Elisabeth considered the girl in front of her. No. Manuela was no longer just a girl. She was not a woman *yet* either, but she was starting to look, and sound like one. And Elisabeth needed to treat her as such.

“Manuela,” she began carefully. “We have talked about this already.”

“No, as a matter of fact, we have not. We have never even mentioned what *this* was.”

“*This* is nothing. It cannot be,” Fräulein von Bernburg affirmed, and tried to snatch her hand away.

“To me, *this* is everything. You are everything,” Manuela said passionately, and she closed her fingers firmly around the other woman’s hand, not wanting to let her go just yet.

“Manuela…” she repeated, trying to control the tremor in her voice.

“Why did you come back?”

It left Elisabeth to ponder for a moment. She was not even sure herself. She decided to go with the safest answer she could conjure.

“Because Fräulein von Racket asked me to. And we both agreed from the start that my return would only be temporary.”

Manuela nodded, visibly disappointed.

“Were you happy, in those two years away from school?”

Again, the question was heavy with implications. Elisabeth was determined to stay grounded, but Manuela was looking at her with such open honesty that she was finding it difficult to keep her walls up.

“Yes.”

“I see…” Manuela whispered as she lowered her head. She opened her fingers and freed the captive hand from her grip.

Fräulein von Bernburg, however, did not withdraw and instead, intertwined their fingers to both hers and Manuela’s shock.

“No, you don’t,” she said firmly. “Now. Listen to me. I was not happy

to be away. Being happy was something I decided, something I had to work for."

Manuela looked hesitant for a moment, almost as if she didn't believe her.

"So you think anyone can be happy, then? Is it really this simple?"

"I can only speak for myself. I know I could be much, much happier," she said, making direct eye contact with Manuela. "But I am content with what I have for now."

"What would make you happier?"

She laughed at the innocence behind the question, and also at the very simple answer that suddenly came to mind. *You*. Of course she could never say so.

"I don't know yet," she replied.

"I know what would make *me* happy," and in turn, Manuela looked at the other woman pointedly.

Elisabeth did not know how to answer that. Instead, she turned her head away and caught a glimpse of the big wooden clock on the wall, "Oh, it's almost four o'clock! I should bring you back to school."

Manuela's face fell instantly.

"Already? Can't we stay just a little bit longer?"

"I'm afraid not. We already took a big risk today. Let's not tempt fate, shall we?"

/

Elisabeth and Manuela walked back to school in silence, each stealing

quick glances at the other from time to time. The temperature seemed to have suddenly dropped, and the mood had darkened, both unwilling to part after such an unexpected, yet wonderful day.

When they arrived at the gates, Elisabeth stopped.

“You’re not coming in with me?”

“No, I should go back home.”

Nodding half-heartedly, Manuela took a tentative step towards the woman in front of her.

“Somehow it doesn’t seem enough… but thank you. For everything. It was the best day of my life.”

Elisabeth wanted to laugh it off, but she was suddenly struck by the realisation that it had probably been the best day of her life as well. She tried to swallow down the lump forming in her throat as she watched Manuela’s eyes fill with tears.

“Don’t cry,” she whispered, and she wrapped her arms around the girl’s shoulders, holding her close as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Manuela instantly buried her face in her neck, breathing her in with a low moan. They knew it was careless to be embracing like this in the open where anyone could see them, but nothing seemed to matter. They were melting into each other, lost in the warmth and intimacy of the moment.

“I love you,” Manuela whispered hotly against Elisabeth’s neck before placing an open-mouthed kiss on the exposed skin.

The woman closed her eyes as a shiver rippled through her, both from the kiss and from the words. *Oh Manuela. I love you too, so much,* she wanted to reply. Holding onto the last bit of morality within her, she pushing away from the girl but still dropped a tender kiss on her

forehead as an unspoken show of acceptance. Or maybe she was selfishly allowing herself one last touch before leaving.

“I must go. Take good care of yourself, Manuela. I will see you soon.”

“Goodbye, Fräulein von Bernburg.”

The look on Manuela’s face was heart-breaking, and Elisabeth felt tears well-up in her eyes. Biting her lip, she swiftly turned around and walked away from the gates without looking back.

## 15. Chapter 15

“Manuela! Oh, I’ve missed you,” Kleist exclaimed as she engulfed Manuela in a friendly hug.

“Me too,” Manuela admitted with a smile, patting her friend’s back.

Breaking away from the hug, Yvette held the other girl at arm’s length and proceeded to scan her appearance thoroughly.

“Did they treat you well? Didn’t you lose some weight?”

“It was only for a week, Yvette. Everything went well,” Manuela assured as she sat on the bed next to her friend’s open suitcase. “What is that?” she asked, pointing at a small packet with a red ribbon.

“Hands off!” Yvette said, feigning indignation. Unable to maintain a straight face at Manuela’s apologetic look though, she quickly pushed the book towards her with a chuckle. “It’s for you, silly. Open it!”

Manuela’s eyes lit up and she immediately grabbed the present, tearing off the wrap paper eagerly. It was a small book with an elegant green leather cover. In golden letters was written: *Le Cid,* Pierre Corneille.

Intrigued, she quickly leafed through it.

“It’s in French! Entirely in French!” the girl said enthusiastically.

“You said you wanted to improve, didn’t you? And this is also a great opportunity to bring the theatre club back to life,” Yvette said with a knowing smile.

“This is brilliant!” she exclaimed and jumped from the bed to give Yvette another hug. “Thank you Yvette, I’ll start reading it tonight!”

“It’s nothing, really. I wish you didn’t have to spend Christmas and your birthday on your own,” Yvette said guiltily.

Manuela suddenly lowered her eyes and tried to conceal a smile.

“What is it?”

“I wasn’t exactly ‘alone’, on my birthday,” Manuela admitted.

“Did your brother come by?”

Manuela nodded and then scanned the room to make sure the others were all still busy unpacking.

“He did… And someone else came, too,” she murmured.

Yvette frowned for a few seconds, before her eyebrows shot up at the realisation.

“You don’t mean…?”

Manuela shook her head vigorously and bit her lip to contain her grin.

“We went ice-skating. Oh, and we even ate chocolate cake!” the girl said before a furrowing her brow. “I know she merely took pity on me. She would have done it for just about anyone, but it was so lovely of her...”

“My God, Manuela…” she whispered, but Manuela’s eyes were lost in space and she seized her by the shoulders. “Don’t you realise? After all you’ve put her through, after… what happened a while ago? Do you really think she would have done it for just about anyone?”

“What are you talking about? Of course, she would have. I am just a student to her, she said so herself!” Manuela whispered furiously.

Letting go, Yvette crossed her arms and shook her head in dismay, as if she was looking at a simpleton.

“Manuela, for once, please think before you talk!”

“But…,” the girl opened and closed her mouth in incomprehension, then huffed and sat heavily on the bed, offended and confused.

Yvette sighed and turned her attention back to her suitcase with a shrug. Manuela watched her for a while, still baffled by their exchange. The blonde girl had the reputation of being peaceful and understanding and Manuela had never seen her upset like this. Even now, she looked poised and relaxed as if nothing had happened. Manuela studied the way she moved, light and elegant on her feet; how she meticulously folded her clothes before setting it into the wardrobe. The vision was soothing and soon, her anger had subsided, leaving only a feeling of utter confusion within her. She replayed the conversation in her head. Fräulein von Bernburg was selfless and would have done the same for anyone, she was sure of that. However, if she was being honest, Manuela knew she was not just *anyone* to Fraülein von Bernburg. In all these times Manuela had voiced –or shown- her love for her, the teacher had never appeared scandalised or disgusted; not once had she lectured her about her feelings being immoral. Every time, she had merely pushed her away as if to contain it. Almost as if it was not the gesture itself, but the moment that was wrong. Everything seemed to click into place at once, and Manuela made a strangled sound, causing Kleist to look at her questioningly. Their eyes met, Manuela’s wide with shock and Yvette’s playful, although somewhat patronising.

“Well? Do you see it now?”

Manuela blinked and nodded mutely.

“Why does Manuela look like she’s just walked in on Racket washing Frau Oberin’s back in the shower?” Westhagen yelled mockingly from the back of the room.

“Surely, Manuela would prefer walking in on Fräulein von Bernburg!” This sounded like Kerpenbach.

“Well, me too!” Another one giggled.

“Shut up!” This was definitely Treskow.

This seemed to shake Manuela from her torpor.

“Don’t pay attention to them,” Yvette said with a smile.

“Do you think she could… be returning my feelings?” She asked without even looking at the bunch of agitated girls behind Yvette.

“That’s not for me to say. But if she does… her situation must be terribly hard.”

A wordless nod.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know…” Manuela pressed her lips together and remained quiet for a while. “You’re right, Yvette. I don’t know for sure what she feels for me… but if she feels anything, her position is much worse than mine. She cannot afford to show anything and I... I will be patient. I will stay back, observe her. And if I find out that she loves me too, I will reassure her. Show her that she can trust me. I will wait for her,” Manuela said resolutely.

“That’s very wise, Manuela. When things are meant to be, people find a way.”

“Oh, we will. If she wants me, I will be with her. No matter what it takes, we will find a way,” Manuela murmured, lifting her chin in determination.

It was as if this new perspective had instantly transformed Manuela. Suddenly, there was a glimmer in her eyes, something about the way her chest stuck out that made her look full of confidence, and also extremely beautiful. For some reason, it made Yvette blush and lower her eyes. It was not that she was jealous of Fräulein von Bernburg; not really. She merely hoped that, one day, she would find someone who loved her this much, with such pure and honest passion. Like

most girls her age, Yvette had only read about love in books and she had to admit that seeing it bloom in such a way in front of her eyes was absolutely exhilarating.

“I’m sure you will,” she smiled and squeezed Manuela’s hand tenderly.

# 16. Chapter 16

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> First and foremost, a big thank you to the readers and those who take time to comment and give feedback on this story. You guys are awesome and I just wanted to remind you that this is much, much appreciated :) We're now reaching over 20K with this long-ass chapter! Also, this one (and a few other chapters after that... erhm...) has some angst in it, so be warned and please, try not to hate me too much!

“In French you say? And you think they will manage to learn a full play in another language?” Racket asked with barely concealed disdain.

Mademoiselle Aubert straightened in her seat and lifted her chin in defiance.

“I can adapt it; make the dialogues slightly shorter or cut out scenes… They suggested the play themselves. And with all due respect, Fräulein von Racket, we haven’t really been suffocated by theatre projects recently, have we?”

Racket gave a reluctant nod.

“Fine. Of course, I expect this little distraction to have no impact whatsoever on their otherwise serious and meaningful tasks. This is a school, not a circus. Thank you, ladies, this is all for today.” With a wave of the hand that would have put Frau Oberin to shame, the meeting was dismissed and the teachers rose from their seats as one.

Once in the corridor, Fräulein von Bernburg discreetly strained her ear to catch a glimpse of the conversation between Mademoiselle Aubert and Miss Evans, who were walking a few feet ahead of her.

“Do you have an idea about the roles distribution?”

“Meinhardis will be my Don Rodrigue for sure. She is the only one of

these girls who can act properly. Well, apart from Erika von Kleist, *bien entendu*."

"I seem to remember her Romeo was quite convincing, indeed. A little too much, perhaps," Miss Evans said with a mocking chuckle and a sly look over her shoulder.

Elisabeth lowered her head on purpose at that, pretending to be captivated by the batch of notebooks in her hands. In turn, Mademoiselle Aubert's spun around brusquely.

"Elisabeth, would you mind helping me at the theatre club? Just one or two evenings per week, to assist the girls during rehearsals."

Fräulein von Bernburg jumped at the unexpected question. It would be the perfect excuse to spend some time with Manuela without raising suspicion. She so wanted to see her evolve around a scene, completely unburdened of her inhibitions as she became engrossed in a character. This was a side of Manuela she had only had a taste of, and she was eager to see more of it. She tried not to let her mind wander to the time she had summoned Manuela in her classroom to help with her lines. As she opened her mouth to accept the offer, she caught a glimpse of Miss Evans again and froze. She was looking at her face closely, almost suspiciously. In fact, she was studying her, obviously waiting for a particular reaction.

"Well?" Mademoiselle Aubert prompted with her typical impatience.

"Sorry, Françoise, I'm not… sure I'll have time to spare for the theatre club," she said finally.

She saw something flicker in Miss Evans' eyes, something like disappointment maybe, and she quickly excused herself, leaving her two colleagues behind in the hallway.

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The next weeks passed by quickly and the chill of winter was soon replaced by the pleasant glow of the early spring sun.

All the girls were invested in the play, even those who had not been cast as comedians and were involved in sewing costumes or in charge of the set, and they had trouble concealing their excitement. Without surprise, Manuela had been given the role of Don Rodrigue, the valorous war hero; and Yvette was to play his lover, Chimène, although most girls had fought tooth and nails to get the role. Treskow had reluctantly accepted to play Doña Urraque, who was supposed to be in love with Don Rodrigue. The mere idea was revolting to Alexandra, but Manuela had insisted she was the only one fit for the role and well, she could not help but agree on this.

Elisabeth, as for her, was delighted to see her students so immersed in a cultural activity. She had always made a point of encouraging creativity and expression through arts in all her years of teaching, and the girls' eagerness towards the play was a beautiful reward. In truth, it made Elisabeth's chest swell with pride even though she was not directly involved in it. It was for the best, but it also meant she was now seeing even less of Manuela. The girl no longer took the time to stay behind after class just for the pleasure of spending a few minutes with her. Now, when the bell rang, Manuela was among the first to leave and run to the art room to rehearse her role. The teacher understood, of course. Manuela was a perfectionist, and if she was going to tread the boards again, she would leave nothing to chance. Therefore, Elisabeth stood by her desk and indulgently watched the girl go after class, sometimes lucky enough to catch her eyes. When she did, she would send a discreet smile her way, but would soon lower her eyes in fear Manuela would read the neediness, the longing in them.

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The first Sunday of March was uncharacteristically sunny and Fräulein von Bernburg decided going out of the house would not be such a terrible idea. Maybe it would even allow her to stop fretting

over Manuela for a few hours. She donned an elegant lace-sleeved cream-coloured dress; one of her favourites. The weather was clement and warm, and she guessed a mere shawl around the shoulders should be enough. Adjusting the hat on the top of her head, she took a look at herself in the mirror, and allowed a smile to form on her lips. *Acceptable*, she thought with a final nod.

Elisabeth walked the few miles that separated her house from the town centre, enjoying the clean fresh air of early spring and the sight of nature coming back to life after a rigorous winter. She felt inexplicably content just walking outside without a real purpose and she could not quite say why. It did not matter. Everything did not have to make sense all the time, did it? She made her way to the town market, and took her time strolling down the place, stopping every once in a while to talk to a stallholder, to pick fresh fruits here and smell a bunch of flowers there. Children were running around, birds were singing and bystanders were greeting her politely as she walked past them. She was enjoying the charming buzz of town, enveloping and reassuring compared to the cold and stern atmosphere of school. Yes, going out had been a very good idea indeed.

Elisabeth sat on a bench and with a peaceful smile, looked at the families walking around, and the young people sitting at the cafés, relaxing in the sun. Suddenly, a flash of blue and chestnut caught her eye, and she abruptly stood up to make sure she was not dreaming. There, sitting across the street at the terrace of a café, was Manuela von Meinhardis. She was wearing a white blouse and a long dark skirt, and her hair was down, with some strands pinned back behind her head. Elisabeth felt her breath catch in her throat and she pressed a hand to her chest in awe. Her soft curls were flowing freely around her shoulders and she sat straight and poised, looking every bit a young woman. A breath-taking woman. Elisabeth was ready to cross the street and get to her, but what she saw next caused her good mood to deflate instantly. Sitting right by Manuela's side was a young man with jet black hair and blue eyes, dressed in an elegant grey suit. She shook her head, trying to recompose herself. Could it be another one of Manuela's brothers? If so, why would he be eating the girl

with his eyes in such fashion? Unable to look away, Elisabeth felt bile rise in her throat as he reached for her hand over the table and craned forward to murmur something in her ear. At the vision, she snatched her basket furiously from the bench and hurried away from the market place without daring to throw another look in their direction. This vision had been absolutely nonsensical. But could it be real? Manuela was out of school, spending her only day off in the month with this silly-looking boy? Who even was he? How had she managed to meet a boy, being confined almost all year-long in boarding school… *What about me?* She thought, suddenly desperate. What about that so-called love she had professed to her? Was it all just a game for this little minx? So young and already keen on seducing everyone around her, with no regard for people's feelings!

Elisabeth had no recollection of how she had managed to walk back home. She fumbled with her keys and entered the house, throwing the basket haphazardly in the hallway and slammed the door viciously behind her. So viciously indeed, that the framed painting near the entrance was sent flying into the air, and fell on the ground, glass smashing into a million pieces all around. Elisabeth jumped at the sound and ran a shaking hand down her face when she noticed the mess she had made. Her vision was blurry as she bent down to start collecting the shards. She should have known better, but she still recoiled in shock as a piece of glass sliced viciously through her index finger. Hissing in pain, she hurried to the bathroom to bandage the cut, but as she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror, she stood petrified. Staring back at her was no longer the smiling, confident person she had seen just a few hours earlier, but a dishevelled woman with angry tears staining her pale cheeks. She had not even realized she had been crying and somehow, it angered her even more.

"Look at you, you madwoman!" She screamed at herself in the glass. "What were you thinking? What were you even expecting?"

The reflection did not answer but looked back with horrified, glassy eyes at the harsh, yet painfully honest words, and Elisabeth sank to the floor in tears.

## 17. Chapter 17

Monday came all too quickly. Elisabeth had barely recovered from her outburst and was aching all over. Her muscles were sore from crying and writhing, she was exhausted and above all, she was angry. Naturally, she was angry at Manuela, at her loving eyes and her passionate confessions that turned out to be nothing more than immature words, from an immature teenager. She was angry at the images that kept replaying in her head, of Manuela, quietly beautiful, and of this dull-looking boy sitting next to her, touching her… It was unbearable. It made her eyes close and her throat tighten in agony. And yet, Elisabeth realised, she was even angrier at herself. Spending a whole day crying like a fool over a girl half her age? It was reckless, debasing, humiliating. *A girl. Half her age.* She could not even say these shameful words out loud. She needed to pull herself together.

When she came back to school, Elisabeth was looking like a shadow of herself. She entered the classroom without sparing her students a look, and started the lesson immediately, her voice painfully strained.

Manuela had noticed something was off at the first glimpse of Fräulein von Bernburg in the doorway. She followed the teacher with her eyes as she walked to her desk. She studied the unusual stoop in her shoulders, her pale, hollow cheeks with growing concern and as her eyes fell on her bandaged finger, her frown deepened.

“What is wrong with Fräulein von Bernburg today?” Yvette asked discreetly.

Manuela shook her head, unable to look away from the woman in front of her.

“I don’t know... I will go talk to her, I… I don’t like this.”

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After class, as Manuela waited for everyone to leave, she met Yvette's worried gaze and sent a quick smile her way before turning her attention back to the teacher. The classroom was now completely empty, save for them both. Maybe Fräulein von Bernburg was unaware of her presence, or maybe she was simply ignoring her like she had for the whole lesson. She was shoving sheets of paper in a folder quite forcefully. Manuela approached her with caution, as she would have a wounded animal.

"Fräulein von Bernburg…" she whispered.

Still not meeting her gaze, Fräulein von Bernburg continued what she was doing, unperturbed.

"I don't have time, Meinhardis. Please leave."

"I just want to know what is wrong," Manuela all but pleaded, taking a step forward.

Elisabeth inhaled deeply and finally looked at her, although she averted her eyes almost right away.

"Not that it is any of your concern, but nothing is wrong. Now, please," she pointed her finger towards the door in a silent command.

Manuela seemed to hesitate for a moment, then decided to take another step closer.

"Please…"

"I said leave!" Elisabeth's voice boomed uncharacteristically in the room along with the sound of her palm slamming furiously against the desk.

Manuela stood there with wide eyes, stunned by the unexpected violence. She took in the woman's heaving chest, her dilated pupils and her reddened cheeks. She had already seen her in this state, and it had been absolutely delightful. But it was different now. Fräulein von Bernburg was enraged, and for the first time, Manuela was almost scared of her. She was about to turn around and leave the room without another word when a flash of red caught her attention. The cut on Fräulein von Bernburg's finger had reopened with the

force of the blow against the table, and blood was quickly spreading under the gauze. Manuela eyed the injured finger with growing panic and, on impulse, captured it between her hands. Time seemed to slow down as their eyes finally met, and Elisabeth studied the distraught frown on the girl's face.

"You're bleeding!"

Coming to her senses, the teacher snatched her hand away and turned her back on her.

"Do *not* touch me," she spat coldly.

"I don't understand… Why are you like this? What happened?"

"Nothing happened. And what is going on in my life has *nothing* to do with you. Go now, or you will be late for class. It would be a shame to be grounded for your next Sunday outing…" She closed her eyes and against her better judgment, she added, "You wouldn't want to miss your next rendezvous with your suitor now, would you?"

Behind her she heard a gasp, confirming that Manuela had, indeed, been seeing a man on Sunday. That she was not going crazy, or at least, not completely. She turned around, her eyes ablaze and vicious but instead of seeing Manuela lowering her head in shame, she watched the girl shake her head and take another step closer to her. Gently, Manuela took her hand and, avoiding the rapidly reddening cloth, brought it to her mouth to give it a tender kiss.

"Whatever you think you saw is wrong. This man is not my lover, and I was certainly not happy to be here. Let me explain," she begged with wide, supplicating eyes.

"It doesn't matter. I know everything I need to know. I don't want to hear a single word of it again," the teacher answered harshly, turning her head to avoid those eyes. She would not bend, not now.

There was a moment of silence and Manuela released the captive

hand.

“I don’t think this is true,” she announced, her chin jutting forward in defiance. “I understand your resentment, but this is not what you think. When you are ready to hear me out, I will be there,” she searched the woman’s face for any sort of acknowledgement. Finding none, she let out a dejected sigh and made her way to the door.

“Please have this finger looked at,” she said over her shoulder before leaving for good.

# 18. Chapter 18

That evening, Manuela could not get to her desk fast enough as she entered the study room. She sat down and immediately reached for a clean sheet of her favourite notepaper, with elegant pastel flowers adorning the margin.

“Meinhardis! No writing letters during the week,” Rackow called from behind her shoulder, as inflexible as ever.

“I won’t be long! I just –I really need to write something…” Manuela ventured, sending her a pleading look.

“You can write it on Sunday, not during study session,” the older girl replied threateningly as she tried to snatch the piece of paper away.

At this moment, Yvette seemed to appear out of nowhere and gently took Rackow by the arm.

“Marga, please… can you make an exception, just for today?” she asked with a sweet voice.

As she had suggested a while ago, Marga von Rackow was indeed not insensitive to Yvette’s charms and an uncharacteristic, furious blush came tinting her cheeks as she let herself be led away from Manuela, uncharacteristically pliant. Turning slightly to face her best friend, Yvette grinned proudly and winked. Manuela chuckled under her breath, then turned her attention back to the letter.

“*My beloved Fräulein von Bernburg,*” she started.

She stopped and frowned at the familiarity of the formula. Maybe it was not appropriate, maybe she ought to use a more neutral term... *Oh well, come what may!* She thought after a second of reflection. Now was not the time to be reasonable and prudent. She was in love, and she wanted Fräulein von Bernburg to know it.

*“My beloved Fräulein von Bernburg,*

*I am writing this letter out of deep concerned over your condition. I understand that I have an involuntary role in your disarray, and I hope what I say to you will be enough to chase whatever trouble you had to suffer because of me.*

*You saw me on Sunday in town in the company of a young man. Although there is no reason for me to deny it, it is the purpose of this encounter that you might be mistaken about. I pray that you will read and trust my words, as it is the honest and bare truth.*

*As you know, I recently turned 17, which means I will soon have to leave school. Since my brother has been enrolled in the army, my aunt is the only family I have left and I am expected to go live with her after I graduate. However, and surely because of the contempt she feels towards me, she is unwilling to welcome me into her home, even temporarily. However, it seems she has found quite an ingenious way to circumvent her family duties. As I have very recently discovered, she is planning on marrying me off to a well-born young man I know nothing about. As a matter of fact, my aunt had written to announce that we would be going out for lunch with my uncle on Sunday, and although I was surprised, I found the idea to be quite pleasant. But of course, I should have known better. When I reached the gate on Sunday morning, my aunt was here indeed, but flanked by this arrogant young man I had never heard of in my life. She turned to him, saying he was to bring me back to school by four o’clock, then got back into the carriage without a goodbye and left me with him in spite of my protestations.*

*I lament the manner in which you had to learn about my unfortunate situation and that you believed, even for a second, that I could spend time with him out of pleasure. I can assure you that all I could think about while I was forced to listen to his self-centred monologue was seeing your smile again the next morning. I feel ashamed and angry that I was not able to warn you beforehand; yet, I feel a sense of joy that you reacted so intensely at the thought I could love another. If I dared, I would even let myself believe you felt something for me in return. My words may appear inappropriate; they certainly are, but my heart is now open and bare before you and I shall not refrain. I love you, Fräulein von Bernburg and even if you can never love me back, please do not doubt the extent of my sentiments for you. No one will ever take your place in my heart, as my*

*heart is full of you, and only you.*

*With all my love,*

*Manuela von Meinhardis."*

/

When morning came, Manuela was the first to wake up and she quietly slipped out of the dormitory before anyone else could see her. If Rackow started asking questions, she figured Yvette would take matters into her own hands and come up with some sort of diversion. As she quietly made her way through the corridors and outside of the building, Manuela felt quite fortunate that she had such a good friend in her dear Yvette.

She quickly reached the gates, and without even attempting to hide herself, clutched the iron bars impatiently. She waited for what seemed like ages until she finally noticed a familiar silhouette down the way. She saw the woman slow down as she registered her presence, and resume her pace until she opened the gates without looking at her. Bracing herself, Manuela reached for the letter inside her blouse and all but threw it in Fräulein von Bernburg's face when she came to her level.

"Good morning, Fräulein von Bernburg. Here. Please," she panted.

As she had feared, the teacher threw her a quick, sceptical look and walked right past her, effectively ignoring the letter and Manuela's request. Dumbfounded, the girl quickly ran to catch her teacher's wrist, forcing her to turn around.

"Meinhardis! Let go of me!" Fräulein von Bernburg cried out, properly scandalized.

Manuela freed the wrist immediately, but brought her face close to her teacher's in supplication. She searched the deep-blue eyes, looking for any hint of acceptance or rejection. Seeing none, she

leaned forward very slowly to let the woman the chance to push away, and pressed a soft kiss to the corner of Fräulein von Bernburg's lips. She knew she was playing with fire and quickly stepped back. Gazing intently at her, she handed the letter for the second time. Elisabeth, all parted lips and wide eyes, took the piece of paper and left without a word.

During class Manuela was focusing on Fräulein von Bernburg's every move, thirsty for any sign acknowledging that she had read her letter; that she understood. To no avail. Just like the day before, Fräulein von Bernburg methodically avoided her gaze. Manuela sighed in frustration. When the bell chimed, she debated on whether to stay behind or leave with her classmates. Fräulein von Bernburg obviously did not want anything to do with her, and perhaps leaving her alone was the best thing to do for now.

As she passed by her desk though, she was surprised to hear, “Meinhardis? Stay here, I need to talk to you.”

Manuela turned around in shock. Fräulein von Bernburg was staring right at her, an undecipherable expression on her face.

“M…me?” She asked in a feeble voice.

“Is there another Meinhardis here? And shut the door, please,” she commanded.

## 19. Chapter 19

Manuela tried to ignore the deafening sound of her blood pumping in her ears as she walked to the door and locked it shut. She turned around and eyed her teacher cautiously, as if expecting to be sent away any minute. Fräulein von Bernburg was leaning against her wooden desk nonchalantly, her arms crossed in front of her. She was not smirking, not really, but she had a certain gleam in her eyes she had never seen before. It made Manuela's knees wobble.

"Come here," she instructed as she uncrossed her arms.

Manuela did not need to be asked twice and came close, so close that their chests were practically touching. Looking down, she watched as their bosoms rose and fell quickly, almost identically with their ragged breathing; a sign that her teacher was just as nervous as she was.

"I read your letter," Fräulein von Bernburg whispered. "I understand."

Manuela nodded slowly; unsure of which part of the letter Fräulein von Bernburg was referring to, exactly.

After a moment of silence, the teacher spoke again. "What are you going to do about it?"

The girl frowned, taken aback by the question. "I don't know, I – I was too worried about you hating me to really think this through."

Finally breaking into a sincere smile, the older woman lifted a gentle hand to stroke Manuela's hair.

"How could I ever hate you?" she murmured, almost as if talking to herself.

"I could not stand the idea of you hurting so much because of me."

Fräulein von Bernburg shook her head in dismissal, trying to avoid the girl's burning gaze.

"I was silly."

"No! Never!" Manuela exclaimed and she took another step forward, effectively pressing their bodies together.

Elisabeth was instantly paralysed by the fierceness in the girl's eyes and the feeling of her soft, warm body against hers. She did not even attempt to fight her instinct and she immediately melted against Manuela, wounding her arms around the girl's shoulders. Without missing a beat, Manuela's arms came snaking around her waist to draw her even closer, both of them finally yielding, and happily so. Elisabeth took her time to study the young woman. So close, the turmoil of emotions so openly displayed on her face was incredible and fascinating. Her brow was slightly creased and her watery eyes were pleading, almost reverent. Maybe Elisabeth's own face was betraying her inner struggle as well. Maybe they were both looking at an answer in each other's eyes.

The older woman let her gaze wander to Manuela's mouth and she suddenly felt dizzy with want. Almost intuitively, she reached out and pressed a thumb to Manuela's soft, pink lips. She should have stopped right away. She was crossing a line and she knew it, but her body and her heart seemed to have a will of their own. The touch could have been platonic had it remained light and fleeting, but as the finger lingered, Manuela gave it a soft kiss, then another one, and another one, firmer and bolder each time, definitely shattering any pretence of innocence behind the gesture. Elisabeth felt a pang of warmth hit her core at the voluptuous caress and as she met Manuela's darkened eyes, she realised nothing would ever be platonic between them anymore. She finally gave up and surged forward, replacing her finger with her mouth. For a split second, Manuela stood still and Elisabeth almost withdrew in stupor, ready to apologize. At the same moment though, the girl's arms tightened around her waist and she crashed their lips together. What Manuela lacked in experience she made up for with avidity and passion. Daring hands roamed over deliciously round hips and an eager mouth

opened instinctively to deepen the kiss. As she seemed to finally realise what was happening, the teacher broke away in shock and took a quick step back. Her face was burning and she closed her eyes, unable to look at the panting girl in front of her.

“I don’t know what came over me, I… You should leave,” she said feebly, turning away and vaguely attempting to smooth her hands over her skirt.

“No,” Manuela said firmly. “No more of this.”

She took the teacher’s arm and made her turn towards her again. Elisabeth was about to retort, but Manuela was quicker and, leaning forward, she captured the woman’s lips for a second time. This time, Elisabeth did not recoil when Manuela opened her mouth and in turn, she parted her lips to welcome the curious tongue. As she felt Manuela moan into her mouth, all strong and possessive hands on her waist, she let arousal wash over her. It was a surrender, but it tasted like victory, she realised with a shiver. She had waited for so long for this moment. And still, she wanted more. With Manuela she wanted everything, and somehow, everything would never seem to be enough… *Lord, what am I doing?* She broke the kiss with a gasp, placing her hand flat against Manuela’s heaving chest to force some distance between them.

The girl frowned, her eyes clouded with lust, her lips swollen from the kiss. She was impossibly beautiful. And the way she was looking at her…

“Manuela…”

“Yes?” Manuela answered huskily.

“This is not -this is not right,” she exclaimed, horrified.

“You love me…” Manuela interrupted softly. It was not a question; but an affirmation.

“Manuela…”

“Even when you say my name, I can feel it.” With a patient, adoring smile, she took the other woman’s chin delicately between her fingers.

“I… I can’t, Manuela. I can’t!” the teacher almost pleaded as angry tears started welling-up in her eyes.

“But you do! No one is to say that it is wrong, except for the two of us,” she whispered reassuringly.

“You don’t understand the world as it is, my darling. You’re just a child,” Elisabeth said in a sob as she shook her head.

“I am not. I cannot go from being just a child to a woman fit to be wed by force in just the span of a few months.”

This made Elisabeth tense in her arms but she nodded, the paradoxical nature of the situation finally dawning on her.

“Then, what?” she finally asked, breaking their embrace. She walked to the window, her back to Manuela. She could not think clearly when the girl was holding her like this, or looking at her with such loving eyes.

“What do you suggest? Should we begin a secret affair until you leave school to marry this idiotic boy?”

When she felt two hands sneak under her arms and rest on her shoulders, she did not turn around, but let Manuela mould herself against her back, and bury her nose in her hair.

“Or we could run away?” Manuela offered cheekily as she kissed her neck. *Why not, after all?*

Elisabeth slightly turned her head to the side and huffed disapprovingly. “Is now really the time for jokes?”

“Aren’t you happy? Doesn’t it feel good?” Manuela murmured in her ear as she draped her arms around Elisabeth’s stomach.

The teacher closed her eyes, all her worries suddenly numbed by the girl’s confident voice and protective hold. She lowered her own hands and placed them over Manuela’s.

“It feels perfect,” she admitted with a sigh and she let her head roll against Manuela’s shoulder.

“I know the odds are against us, but I am willing to fight. I will do anything to be with you.”

“You are very sure of yourself, aren’t you?” Elisabeth asked fondly.

“And I am sure of you, too,” she whispered. “Don’t reject me. This is something we both want, not something we have to fight.”

Fräulein von Bernburg remained silent for a moment, as if analyzing the situation carefully. Then she slowly turned into Manuela’s arms and examined that hopeful, loving face. She was not sure she wanted to live a single day without it.

“If anyone learns about it…” she started, trying to sound sinister although she could feel the smile forming on her lips.

“No one will learn a thing. We will be careful!” Manuela assured with fervour. “So very careful…” she whispered before surging forward and pressing her lips to Elisabeth’s once again.

The older woman tensed for a second, before she melted against her, utterly conquered. Closing her eyes, she let the kiss deepen and her own protests vanish. There would decidedly be no turning back now. And maybe, she thought as she let her hands slide against Manuela’s shoulders, it was not so terrible, after all.

## 20. Chapter 20

The costume was terribly uncomfortable. The breeches were too tight, the shirt was scratchy and the red velvet cape was atrociously warm and heavy, making it difficult for Manuela to even breathe. In spite of that, Manuela felt incredibly happy. She felt ecstatic, even. It was their first costume rehearsal. It was their first chance to actually 'become' their character, Mademoiselle Aubert had said. And, well… the play was decidedly not the only reason for her bright mood. It had been a month since she had discovered that her love for Fräulein von Bernburg's was, indeed, requited. They were in love, although it was absolutely forbidden to act like it most of the time. A few kisses were exchanged here and there between classes, but the teacher was adamant about restricting their encounters to a strict minimum. Manuela knew it was for the best, but it did not mean she had to like it. Regardless, she cherished every fleeting and intense moment they could spend together. She felt her cheeks burn as she was suddenly assailed by the memory of the last hurried kiss they had shared behind a tree, just a week ago. Someone cleared their throat, making Manuela's enamoured grin disappear at once. Now was not the time to get distracted, however pleasant the distraction was. She squeezed the handle of her sword, and narrowed her eyes menacingly at Westhagen, her acting partner for the scene. She had inherited the role of Don Gomes, who, incidentally, happened to be a fat, old man. Saying that Ilse had it worse than her was an understatement. When she had stepped on stage with her ridiculous grey wig and her cane, Manuela had been unable to repress a snort, although Yvette, ever the gentle soul, had elbowed her in the ribs viciously in reprimand.

"It looks good, Ilse," the blonde girl had said indulgently and Manuela, hand still pressed to her mouth, had only been able to nod in false agreement.

*'Parle sans t'émouvoir.*

*Je suis jeune, il est vrai; mais aux âmes bien nées*

*La valeur n'attend point le nombre des années.'*

*(Ah, have no fear, though.*

*Young I may be; but in the noble heart*

*Valour.s no need of years, a thing apart.)*

Manuela sent an anxious look towards Mademoiselle Aubert as she concluded the line.

“Stop looking at me! Focus on your verse!” the French woman commanded in her high-pitched voice.

“But… how is it?”

“It’s fine, Meinhardis. Fine! Do you need a pat on the back after each line you deliver without stuttering?”

Manuela ignored the remark and turned her attention back to Ilse. She adjusted her wig before taking a step towards Manuela, and she waved her cane at her in what was supposed to be a threatening gesture.

*‘Te mesurer à moi! Qui t'a rendu si vain, toi qu'on n'a jamais vu les armes à la main!’*

*(Against me, you’d measure your mettle,*

*You who have never even seen a battle?)*

The drama teacher jumped on her feet. “No, no, no! Slower! Do you even understand a word you are saying?”

“Well… of course, not,” Westhagen replied with a shameless shrug. There was a loaded silence before everyone in the room brusquely erupted in laughter.

“If you’re taking it so lightly, there will be no play at all,” the teacher huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “This is all for today, your lack of endowment for the arts is giving me a headache.”

With a dramatic sigh, Mademoiselle Aubert exited the room, leaving the girls looking at each other in confusion.

“What now?” Westhagen asked.

“We still need to practise, with or without her. Come on, where were we?” Manuela said with determination as she settled on her mark again.

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The rest of the unsupervised rehearsal went relatively well, although it was interrupted here and there by several fits of laughter and the occasional swear word. Two hours later, the girls decided to call it a day.

“That was terrible,” Yvette said with a malicious smile as Manuela jumped off the stage.

“Why, thank you. Compliments are always appreciated,” Manuela curtseyed before she unfastened her heavy cape with a groan. “God, I am boiling with this thing on!”

As she took off the cloak, revealing a white linen shirt and a pair of very snug breeches, she heard loud whistles and exaggerated claps from behind.

“Look at Rodrigue’s strong thighs!” Westhagen said, pointing at said thighs with her cane.

“And that behind is quite something, too!” Wolzogen guffawed.

Yvette gasped and took Manuela’s arm forcefully.

“How dare you? He’s my fiancé!” she exclaimed in mock jealousy.

Mia came from behind and threw her arms around Manuela’s neck.

“Oh, be nice! He’s the only man around, you could share!” she stuck her tongue out at Yvette playfully and both girls started giggling, still hanging on to poor Manuela whose face was now as red as the velvet of her discarded cape.

The cheerful mood was suddenly interrupted by a sharp, familiar voice echoing in the room.

“What is going on here?”

As Fräulein von Bernburg’s silhouette appeared in the doorway, the girls parted with a gasp and lowered their eyes in shame. The teacher quietly made her way towards the group of flushed young ladies and crossed her arms in front of her.

“Am I interrupting?” she asked with a raised eyebrow, trying hard not to focus too much on Manuela.

“We… we were just done rehearsing the play, Fräulein von Bernburg. Sorry if we’ve been too loud,” Westhagen said with her characteristic puppy eyes.

Pursing her lips, the teacher finally let her gaze fall on Manuela and her annoyance instantly melted away at her crestfallen expression. *Poor darling.* She looked absolutely terrorised.

“Very well,” she conceded with a wave of her hand. “All of you, go get ready for dinner. It’s already late.”

The girls proceeded to leave the room without further ado, but Manuela remained hovering by the door and sent her a discreet, but expectant look.

“Oh! Someone needs to clean up this mess,” Elisabeth exclaimed, motioning at the untidy chairs and pieces of costumes scattered across the floor. She then nodded at Manuela pointedly, a smirk already playing on her lips, “Rodrigue, please. Seeing as you are the only man around…”

Further giggles were heard from the group of departing girls, and soon, they were alone in the room. For the first time in a month, Manuela felt inexplicably self-conscious and hesitant. Elisabeth crossed the few metres between them.

“Well?” she started calmly.

Manuela gave her a wary look and remained silent.

“Don’t I get a kiss?” she finally said with a raised eyebrow, and she smiled as she saw Manuela’s shoulders visibly relax.

Without a second of hesitation, the girl walked into her open arms with a grateful sigh, and kissed her tenderly on the cheeks, the nose, the chin, and finally, on the lips. Elisabeth smiled into the kiss and wrapped her arms around Manuela’s shoulders. This intimacy was still new to them, almost unreal at times, yet she was amazed at how natural and familiar it felt. They were a perfect, albeit unlikely match; Manuela all honest passion and Elisabeth all quiet intensity. She broke the kiss after a while and chuckled when Manuela immediately leaned forward to capture her lips again.

“Slow down, my darling,” she murmured softly as she cupped her younger lover’s face.

“Sorry… I missed you.”

“Really? You seemed quite alright without me just now…” Elisabeth teased.

Manuela groaned and closed her eyes in frustration.

“They were only playing around,” she started.

“I know, I know. I’m not angry,” Elisabeth interrupted, stroking the pink cheeks with her thumbs. “I was young once, too.”

“You’re still young,” Manuela assured fervently and she took the woman’s hands in hers.

Elisabeth averted her eyes. Somehow, she was not quite comfortable addressing the issue of their age difference. It was yet again another hindrance that could keep them separated, and although it did not seem to bother Manuela in the least, would it always be so? As if reading her mind, Manuela kissed her right hand reverently and

searched her eyes.

“You are perfect,” she murmured against the delicate skin of her hand.

“Such a well-behaved gentleman,” Elisabeth said as she rearranged the collar of Manuela’s shirt.

With a smile, Manuela took a step back and, holding her arms out, quickly spun around to show the other woman her costume.

“What do you think? It’s too tight, isn’t it? I look ridiculous.”

Elisabeth looked at her with an amused smile, although her eyebrow raised appreciatively and her rosy cheeks were a good indication that Manuela did not look quite so ridiculous, after all.

“You look very handsome. No wonder all the girls are after you.”

“Well, that’s too bad, because I only have eyes for you,” Manuela replied as she wrapped her arms snuggly around the woman’s waist. Elisabeth’s smile suddenly fell.

“You need to go back now.”

“Already? But we barely had any time to talk!” the girl protested.

“This is what you get when you engage in a scandalous affair with your professor. We need to be careful, you know that,” Elisabeth murmured, trying to convince them both.

“But I want… I need to see you more!” Manuela said with fervour.

“All in good time, Manuela,” came the firm answer, but Elisabeth’s eyes betrayed her hopefulness.

Manuela leaned in for another soft kiss and backed away reluctantly.

“Soon. I will never spend a day away from you; I will make sure of it.”

Elisabeth laughed a deep, heartfelt laugh. “Oh, I’m sure you will. But for now you have to tidy up this room and go back to your classmates. Come on, I’ll help you.”

## 21. Chapter 21

Yvette was sitting in the shade of the biggest willow tree in the park, patiently waiting for Manuela to meet her outside. She was going through her letters with unconcealed glee and was just tearing open the one from Julie, her cousin from Paris. As the rules at boarding school had become more flexible, the mail had progressively stopped being subjected to drastic censorship, and Yvette had been able to reconnect with her mother's side of the family. Unfolding the sheet of paper, she started reading the first lines avidly.

"A letter from Julie?" a familiar voice asked from a few feet away.

Yvette lifted her head and nodded, still smiling, but it soon turned into a frown as she caught sight of her friend's sullen face.

"Another letter from your aunt, I take it?" Yvette said, nodding at the crumpled sheet of paper in Manuela's fist. They had planned to make the most of this beautiful Sunday and rehearse their lines outside, but Manuela's sombre mood suggested not much rehearsing would be done.

"Am I that transparent?" the girl asked with a dejected sigh as she sat heavily on the bench.

Yvette instantly pried the letter away from Manuela's hold and read through it with knitted brows, growing more nauseous with each vile, heartless line.

She came across a particularly horrifying paragraph and had to read it out loud.

'*Eckbert will soon tire of your unremitting rejections. I have been working restlessly for months to acquaint you both and I will not have you sabotaging my efforts with your lack of maturity. For some reason, your meagre dowry and insipid personality are enough to maintain this boy's interest for now, but it will not remain that way forever. I want you to understand that I do not get anything out of it; I am merely doing this for*

*your well-being, Manuela. This is a wonderful opportunity for you to become someone important and do something with your life.'*

"That old hag…" Yvette said through gritted teeth.

"She wants me to spend next Sunday with him," Manuela lamented as she buried her head in her hands.

"Is he really this terrible?" Yvette ventured and almost fell from the bench as Manuela's head snapped up in outrage.

"What? I thought you were on my side!" she exclaimed accusingly.

"Manuela, but of course -of course I am!" the blonde girl assured with her hands held out in apology. "It's just… Since you have no choice but to see him, maybe you could try to focus on his pleasant sides. Or his least unpleasant sides?"

Manuela let out a dry, humourless chuckle.

"Trust me, there is nothing pleasant about him. He is arrogant, unread, self-centred and he – he is not…"

"He is not her," Yvette provided helpfully.

Manuela turned to her friend and eyed her curiously. She had been careful not to say anything about her relationship with Fräulein von Bernburg. Actually, she avoided any allusions to her these days. She trusted Yvette, of course she did, but if any of their conversations came to be overheard and her secret exposed, she would surely die. Naturally, it would be devastating for them both, but she could not even imagine what terrible consequences it could have for the teacher. Then, how could Yvette suspect anything? She was clever and perceptive, but still...

"To answer your question from earlier, you *are* quite transparent,"

the blonde said lightly.

Manuela paled and felt bile rise in her throat at the confirmation.

“I… I don’t know what you’re…” she attempted unconvincingly.

“Save it, will you?” Yvette interrupted, but her tone wasn’t harsh. “I’m not stupid. I just hope you know what you’re doing…”

Manuela swallowed, trying to hold back her tears.

“It’s alright. You have nothing to worry about with me, you know that,” Yvette murmured, taking Manuela’s hand in hers.

“I’m… I’m so sorry, Yvette.”

“What are you apologising for, silly? You’ve done nothing wrong,” she assured, giving Manuela’s hand a gentle tug.

“I really couldn’t tell you. I’m scared…,” Manuela admitted, voice quavering. Her vulnerability broke Yvette’s heart and she herself had to fight to keep her own tears at bay.

“No one has to discover anything. It’s just me.”

“It’s not just that… I’m terrified that it will all fall apart eventually…” Manuela confessed softly as she looked away. “Every day I’m afraid that I will lose her. The whole world seems to be against us. What it if turns out to be too much for her to take?”

“I don’t think so, Manuela. Think of all you’ve already been through. She’s still there, isn’t she? I’m sure she’s just as determined as you are,” Yvette said comfortingly.

“I hope you’re right.”

“You need to believe in yourself. You’re strong and you have a big heart; no one in their right mind would ever want to let you go.”

Manuela studied her friend quietly for a moment.

“Why don’t you ever judge me? This is… quite something. Yet, you don’t seem bothered at all. It’s like you don’t see me any differently. Why?” she finally asked with genuine curiosity, and also a hint of admiration.

Yvette nervously shifted on the bench as her cheeks turned a darker shade of pink.

“It’s only love, isn’t it? I just… I was never taught there was anything wrong with loving, as long as you’re not hurting anyone,” she smiled, looking down at their still joined hands.

Manuela shook her head in wonder and without warning, planted a kiss on Yvette’s warm cheek. “What would I ever do without you?”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” Yvette chuckled.

Manuela sighed deeply, and laid her head on her friend’s shoulder. She was feeling lighter, all of a sudden.

“So, any news from Paris?” she asked, pointing at the letter resting on Yvette’s lap.

“Do you want me to read it to you?” the blonde offered with an excited squeak.

“Of course I do!”

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Manuela dragged her feet gloomily through the park, purposefully trailing behind her otherwise delighted classmates. As she caught sight of the young man standing impatiently by the front gate, she felt her jaw tighten in annoyance. She had been very careful to pick up the sternest, most boring dress she owned aside from her school uniform and had coiffed her hair in her usual, tight braid. The dark material of her long dress was reflecting the warm sun in the most unpleasant way and Yvette had said she looked like a nun, which was

just as well. There was no reason for this big goof to assume she had been primping all morning for him.

“Ah, Manuela. Good day,” he said as she finally stopped in front of him. He then took off his hat and grasped her hand to give it a slow kiss.

“Yes, hi,” Manuela muttered, snatching her hand away.

“Are you feeling well? You look quite feeble,” he said, scrunching up his nose as he gave her the once over. Apparently, her appearance was not to his liking. What a pity, really.

“I feel a little nauseous indeed.”

“That’s too bad…”

They walked for a while in silence as he seemed to wrack his brain for a proper answer.

“Well, take heart! I am taking you to the zoo,” he finally offered with a confident smile as he attempted to link their arms.

“I hate zoos,” Manuela growled, and she pulled away abruptly at his unwelcome tentative to get closer.

“Oh? And why is that?”

Manuela drew in a deep breath, trying to repress the urge to slap him across the face.

“Because it is cruel and stupid,” she just said. *Just like the idea of you and me getting married*, she did not say.

“I’m guessing you don’t like hunting either, then,” Eckbert snickered.

“You read right through me,” Manuela replied with a sarcastic smile.

“Well, you’ll have to get used to it when we’re married, because *I* am a hunter -and not a bad one at that!”

*This is going to be a long, long day*, Manuela thought as she closed her eyes in despair.

## 22. Chapter 22

Elisabeth had just gone back from a bracing walk in town and was now sitting comfortably on her rocking chair with a book. The weather was so pleasant today that she had left the sitting-room windows open to let the warm breeze in. Behind her, a soft air of piano was playing on the gramophone. It was a perfectly lovely and relaxing day. *Well, it would resolutely be perfect if a certain someone was present*, she thought, before realising she had read the same line several times already. This certain someone was probably spending her free day with the man who would soon become, if her aunt had her way, her husband. Elisabeth tried to shake the thought from her head. Today was for relaxing, and she knew nothing good would come of languishing over this seemingly inextricable situation. It was already keeping her awake at night, disturbing her at random times during the day, and erasing her smile when she stole glances at Manuela in class. Elisabeth knew jealousy was one of the ugliest sentiments in the world, but the thought of Manuela with this man was sickening. And at times, a small part of her fed by years of inhibition and self-doubt took over, and made her imagine the worst.

Elisabeth resumed her reading, determined not to let these despicable thoughts spoil her day. A few minutes later, however, she was again interrupted, this time by a distinct noise coming from outside. It sounded like someone had knocked on the door. She hastily rose from her chair, although unconvinced. No one ever came to visit her; it was probably something else, a branch swatting on the front door because of the wind, or kids playing in the street.

Elisabeth reached the doorway in a few strides, and there was no mistaking as the same sound resonated, louder this time. Intrigued, she flung the door open and almost cried out when she saw who was on her porch, fist still hanging in mid-air and an expectant smile on her face.

“Manuela?” she gasped.

Then, realising they were in plain day and that anyone could see them together, she quickly pulled the girl inside by the wrist, shutting the door behind them.

“What are you doing here?” Elisabeth exclaimed as she drew her in an instinctive hug.

“I was in the neighbourhood,” Manuela said with a mysterious smile, cheeks slightly pink.

Elisabeth suddenly stepped back, holding her at arms’ length.

“Did you run away from your rendezvous?”

“Don’t call it that,” Manuela growled reprovingly. Then, with a self-satisfied smirk she added, “But I did find a way to escape, yes.”

Elisabeth said nothing, obviously waiting for an explanation.

“All I had to do was say I was… indisposed. Oh dear, when I mentioned ‘girls’ troubles’ –he looked just short of passing out!” she exclaimed as she broke into a fit of giggles.

Elisabeth maintained a serious façade for all but a second before she gave in as well, and soon, both were hanging on to each other as their bodies were shaking with uncontrollable waves of laughter.

“You’re downright evil,” Elisabeth said after a while, as she wiped a single tear at the corner of her eye.

“Oh, it serves him well!”

They eventually sobered up and were left looking at each other with bright eyes. The mood suddenly shifted as they finally took in the situation they were in. Alone, in a safe place, at last.

“Hello,” Manuela murmured.

“Hello,” Elisabeth replied, raising an eyebrow.

Neither could tell for sure who initiated the kiss, but both revelled in it equally, savouring the feeling of their lips joined in unhurried passion. As Manuela broke away for air, she looked at the other woman with adoring eyes.

“I like this dress,” she said, nodding at the white linen summer gown Elisabeth was wearing.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “I wish I could return the compliment… Is it someone’s funeral?”

Manuela giggled as she looked down at her own appearance. “Let’s just say my best looks are reserved for you, exclusively,” she said with a faint blush.

“How very considerate of you.”

Then, Manuela looked around the hallway then back at Elisabeth with a hopeful smile.

The older woman felt herself blanch.

“Well… I did not mean to disrupt your day. I’ll be on my way,” Manuela said as she seemed to sense the other woman’s inner struggle.

Elisabeth rolled her eyes and took her by the hand. Oh well, she would not keep her paintings a secret from Manuela forever anyway, would she? “Come along, silly.”

Manuela happily complied and followed the woman into the living room.

“I suppose you want the grand tour, this time?”

The chestnut-haired girl nodded enthusiastically and she bit her lip in anticipation.

Elisabeth dragged Manuela through the sitting room and the open kitchen as the girl fawned over every single item she was seeing, from the patchwork plaid draped over the leather sofa to the small cast iron kettle sitting on the kitchen table or the giant bouquet of Persian buttercups in the corner of the room. She took in the rich, warm colours of Elisabeth's interior that matched her delicate and elegant personality, and instantly felt at ease here.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"Tea would be nice but… it was not really the grand tour, was it?" Manuela teased with a smile.

She saw Elisabeth hesitate for a moment, then nod resolutely.

"Alright, come with me," she said before leading them into the hallway again.

She stopped in front of a door at the end of the corridor and, with her hand on the handle, she turned slightly towards Manuela, not exactly meeting her eyes as she felt warmth start spreading across her neck and up to her cheeks.

"This is… the painting room," she announced softly and felt more than she saw Manuela nod in impatience. She opened the door and let the girl step in first. The room was plunged into darkness. Elisabeth was usually mindful to close the blinds, especially on sunny days like these. She went to the window and drew the curtains open in one smooth motion, letting the warm afternoon light bathe the room and reveal one of her most guarded secrets.

She heard Manuela gasp in wonder and continued to face the window modestly. She listened as the girl started moving around the room, the sound of her footsteps punctuated by occasional, sharp intakes of breath, as if she had entered a sacred sanctuary. Elisabeth could feel her own breathing quicken and she closed her eyes at the incredible feeling spreading in her chest; a mix of apprehension and excitement as the girl was slowly progressing into her intimacy. At last, she heard Manuela stop just behind her and felt two arms snake around

her waist. Releasing a shaky sigh, she turned her head slightly to catch sight of her lover's face. She felt lips brush her cheek reverently and instantly turned into Manuela's arms, startled by a strange sensation. The girl was biting her lower lip between her teeth and her eyes, almost the same colour as a winter morning sky, were full of big, unshed tears.

"Oh, Manuela...," Elisabeth implored as she draped her arms around Manuela's shoulders and guided her head in the crook of her neck.

She led the girl to a nearby armchair and made her sit flush against her in the tight space, holding her close as she cried soundlessly. She gently caressed her hair, her shoulders, her back, as waves of sobs overcame her. After a while, Manuela seemed to finally calm down and she pressed a tender kiss against Elisabeth's neck.

"Thank you," she murmured against the tender skin, her voice still hoarse from all the crying.

"Whatever for?"

The girl hesitated, angling her head to look at the various portraits of her own self, before turning back to Elisabeth with a grateful smile.

"Everything. For everything," Manuela finally said.

Elisabeth was unsure of how to answer, but she felt she understood what Manuela meant, somehow. She recognised the relief in her eyes, the appeasement. She had felt something quite similar, all these weeks ago, as she had read the letter where Manuela had reasserted her devotion and love for her. It dawned on her that, in her constant effort to remain cautious and unexposed, she had denied Manuela this proof of commitment she had so desperately craved herself. The girl had laid her feelings bare before her without holding anything back, even while she had remained distant and guarded. Her brave, generous Manuela.

She leant forward to capture the pink trembling lips.

“I love you,” she murmured against Manuela’s mouth. It suddenly felt very important to voice it. The delicate nature of words usually altered true feelings, turning them into hyperboles or euphemisms. But at this very moment, Elisabeth was convinced these words were just right.

## 23. Chapter 23

“I told you not to move, but you’re allowed to breathe.”

Manuela automatically let go of the breath she had been holding unconsciously, her eyes lowering in embarrassment. When Elisabeth had offered to draw her, she had accepted enthusiastically, but now she was not really sure what to do with herself. Doing her very best not to fidget too much on her chair, she finally folded her hands on her lap and lifted her chin to face the other woman. Having to remain immobile and focused, even just for twenty minutes, was a test of patience for someone as restless as Manuela, but it was also the opportunity, she realised, to study the woman in front of her as she pleased. She watched in fascination as Elisabeth’s hand moved, applying the charcoal in quick, precise strokes against the paper. She let her eyes wander to elegant shoulders, then up to a delicate neck, until they finally reached her beautiful face. Manuela took in the full, slightly pinched lips, the adorable crease between her eyebrows and the way her nose crinkled almost imperceptibly in concentration. Faint freckles dotted her cheeks, a detail Manuela had never noticed before and suddenly, all she could think about was mapping them with her fingers and lips.

Manuela must have had a funny look on her face for, as Elisabeth lifted her head from the sketchbook for a quick glance, she halted all movements at once and titled her head questioningly.

“What are you doing?”

“I… uh - you… you have freckles,” the girl let out on impulse. *What are you saying, idiot?* She mentally chastised herself.

There was a pause before Elisabeth erupted in a clear, hearty laughter. When their eyes met, and Manuela saw the overwhelming adoration there, she felt the breath knocked out of her lungs for a brief moment.

“They only come out in the sun,” Elisabeth pointed out, before adding; “It’s almost over. You’re doing very well.”

Manuela could only nod numbly, still lost in the beauty of the woman she loved. After a few minutes, Elisabeth lifted her head and wriggled charcoal-stained fingers at Manuela, who took it as her cue to jump from the chair. She came to stand behind Elisabeth and peered at the drawing over her shoulder.

“What do you think?”

Manuela studied the clean, sharp lines and could not hide her grin as she recognised her own face, as clearly as if looking into a very flattering mirror.

“This is beautiful… far more than the original I must say,” she murmured, suddenly very shy.

“Oh shush! No need to be modest,” Elisabeth chuckled, turning her head towards her.

“May I… May I keep it?” the girl asked, hopeful.

“Of course.”

“But you haven’t signed it…” Manuela exclaimed before she paused, frowning. “Unless you think… I mean, if someone came to find it…”

Elisabeth pursed her lips in hesitation, and then scribbled something at the bottom of the picture. Manuela craned her neck and gasped when she realised it was a small heart.

“There,” the woman said, handing her the sketch with a satisfied smirk.

For a moment, Manuela could not tear her eyes away from the bright, playful grin. “You… you are…” *A wonder. A queen. A goddess.* “Thank you,” she finally said, taking the picture delicately between her fingers and leaning forward to kiss Elisabeth’s soft cheek. “You take my breath away.”

Elisabeth rose from her chair and drew Manuela close, sliding her arms around her waist.

“Really? How so?” she smiled, daring.

Manuela gulped and slowly, almost tentatively, she leant in to press her lips against Elisabeth’s. For some reason, being free to hold her like this without fearing anyone would barge in elated her, just as much as it terrified her. The feeling of Elisabeth’s hands along her sides and pressing against her lower back stirred something within her, and she deepened the kiss, soon letting passion overcome apprehension. She wanted to memorise every sensation; from the texture of Elisabeth’s full lips against hers, to the warm, heavy weight of her chest pressed against hers and the delicate sighs that escaped her mouth as their lips seemed to dance together. She could never get enough of this woman; she could never be separated from her. Abruptly, Manuela interrupted the kiss and leant back, just enough to plunge her eyes into the warm, deep-blue orbs.

“Sometimes… I wonder if any of this is real. I cannot quite believe it,” Manuela murmured, as if talking to herself.

Elisabeth's eyes twitched in recognition. She let her fingers ghost against the tender skin of Manuela's neck.

“I assure you. This is real. *We* are real,” she whispered hotly and leant forward to kiss her again, only a little more fiercely; a little more impetuously.

Manuela felt her head start to spin and warmth spread within her belly. She gasped in surprise, and tightened her hold against Elisabeth’s waist, bringing their body close, so close that she could barely tell where one started and the other ended. She felt like she was drowning and flying at the same time; and suddenly, she was overwhelmed.

“I want… ” She pleaded against the open mouth. “I want to feel your

hair beneath my fingers. The skin of your back against my lips. I want so many things; I don't even know what I want…"

Elisabeth effectively broke the kiss at this passionate declaration, eyes wild and dark with desire. It would be so easy to give in, right now. Their moments together were scarce and their future uncertain, and if they both wanted to... The woman squeezed her eyes shut in self-reprimand. *Get a hold of yourself,* she thought. Manuela was still too vulnerable and in fact, if she could not put words on what she wanted, it was precisely because she did not even *know* what it was, yet.

"I'm sorry -was it wrong? What I said..." Manuela ventured, cheeks turning an adorable shade of pink.

"No Manuela, no. It was not wrong. Only… not now."

"I feel so many things for you. I cannot explain it, it's... Don't you feel it, too?" Manuela pressed, her hands caressing Elisabeth's lower back.

The teacher shivered and closed her eyes involuntarily.

"My God, Manuela… Of course, I feel it too," she admitted.

"Then, I don't understand… it feels like it might be our only chance..."

"It is not the right reason," Elisabeth stated calmly, willing her fragile resolve to resist the strength of her own desire. "When the time is right, we will know."

"When? When will it be?"

"When it doesn't feel like it might be our only chance. Patience, you eager little monster," she said and smiled, before she kissed Manuela's frustrated pout away. "Come on, how about this cup of tea we talked about?"

## 24. Chapter 24

Elisabeth smiled as she walked up the grey stone stairs. She smiled a lot lately, and for just about anything. Manuela's impromptu visit just a few weeks ago had been a breath of fresh air, and although all her doubts and fears had not been completely erased, they had resolutely been alleviated. The remainder of their day had been spent laughing and sharing anecdotes over tea; discovering each other in ways they would have never dared imagine just a while ago. Elisabeth had revealed she had sister who now lived in America and in turn, Manuela had talked about her brothers, how she seemed to miss Alfred more these days, and how she and Bertram used to fight for the affection of the same girl at school. This admission had come as a surprise for Elisabeth, or maybe it was due to Manuela's honesty, this remarkable lack of inhibition. She was not so brave, it seemed and when Manuela had titled her head at her in silent encouragement, she had almost wanted to open up and tell her own story. But instead, as she had so dutifully learnt to do over the years, she had averted her eyes and changed the subject, hoping Manuela would not press further.

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When she entered the classroom, Fraülein von Bernburg was surprised to find it empty. Indignation rose in her chest as she scanned the deserted desks where her students should normally be studiously waiting for her. She paced around the room in agitation and suddenly stopped in front of her desk when she caught sight of a bouquet of wild flowers *someone* had placed there. Intrigued, she reached for it and the small card attached to it with a simple piece of twine.

"*I certainly was not allowed to pick them but I just wanted to make you smile on this special day. Happy Birthday – M."*

Elisabeth was not sure if she should feel angry at Manuela's

imprudence, or charmed at the lovely gesture, but the beam appearing on her face seemed to solve her inner conflict of its own accord. *Manuela…* she thought, pressing the note to her chest. She looked fondly at the colourful bouquet, heart almost bursting as a wave of adoration washed over her. She had managed to forget her own birthday, as she so often did, but true to her word, Manuela had remembered and whatever she did, she had made sure Elisabeth would find the flowers before the girls arrived. At that moment, she heard faint footsteps in the corridor and opened the side drawer of her desk to deposit the flowers there, delicately, hoping they would resist for a while without water. The door suddenly burst open and a group of dishevelled, breathless girls entered, wearing contrite looks on their faces. Crossing her arms in front of her chest, Elisabeth stepped into her severe teacher character and eyed them scornfully.

“What is the meaning of this? This is unacceptable," she admonished, willing her voice to remain stern as she saw Manuela bit her lip to repress a grin.

“We’re so sorry, Fräulein von Bernburg, but you see…” Wolzogen started, sending a reproachful glare towards Manuela. “*Someone* decided to hide our alarm clocks and we overslept… a little…”

“Who did this?” the teacher asked in false surprise -although she could very well imagine who the culprit could be.

Everyone turned to Manuela.

“Meinhardis! She did it!” Treskow denounced with fervour.

Manuela mouthed a sarcastic ‘*thank you*’ before turning to the teacher. Theatre lessons seemed to be paying off quite well, Elisabeth thought as she watched Manuela step forward slowly, head down and shoulders slumped.

“It’s true, Fräulein von Bernburg. I did it. It was supposed to be a harmless prank; I wanted to wake them up at the last moment but… I

overslept as well," she concluded, eyes brimming with crocodile tears.

Elisabeth had to will herself to keep an angry face at the absurd scene.

"I don't want to hear it," she interrupted, raising her hand. "Your harmless prank earned you two hours of detention."

"But…" the girl protested, genuinely crestfallen this time.

"No buts or I'll double it. Now go sit down, all of you. We've already wasted enough time."

The girls let out relieved sighs and almost ran to their desks, glad to have escaped the punishment. Sitting down as well, Manuela sent Elisabeth a questioning look, as if to say; '*Two hours*?' to which Elisabeth replied with a raised eyebrow of her own, meaning; *'I needed to be convincing, didn't I?'* When she was sure no other girls were looking, though, the quick but sincere smile she sent her way unmistakably meant *'Thank you for the flowers'.* And Manuela decided that two hours of detention was a small price to pay for such a lovely smile.

## 25. Chapter 25

A joyous ruckus could be heard in the art room as the girls busied themselves setting the stage for the play. They only had a week left and a few hours outside classes to make sure everything was perfect for the big day.

“A little more to the left… not that much!”

“Why do I have to be the one to climb up there, again?” Manuela asked from her standing position on the wobbly step-ladder.

“Because you’re the tallest one,” Westhagen provided, in her quality of self-proclaimed stage manager. “A little higher! Yes, perfect!”

“Rackow is taller than all of us combined,” Manuela whined as she felt her palms start to sweat uncomfortably.

“I’m afraid of heights,” the girl in question offered nonchalantly from her chair.

“It’s almost over, you just need to hang this… this beautiful paper chandelier expertly crafted by Kerpenbach – thank you, Kerpenbach,” Westhagen saluted as she lifted the piece for everyone to see.

“Hurry!” Manuela almost yelled, agitating her hand impatiently.

Ilse nodded in apology and stood on tip-toe, holding out the chandelier as Manuela leant forward to grab it.

“Manuela, be careful!” Yvette warned, but it was too late, she realised, and she watched helplessly as the stepladder swayed to one side, then to the other, making Manuela lose balance and fall face-first on the wooden stage.

“Manuela!” the girls shrieked in unison.

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Twenty minutes later, the injured girl was lying on the infirmary bed, white as a sheet and a massive bandage covering her forehead while Yvette was clutching at her hand quite desperately. With her free hand, Manuela reached up and pressed a tentative index against the growing bump.

“Ouch!” she protested out loud.

“Don’t touch it, dummy!” Yvette scolded with a frown. Then, she softened. “Are you okay?”

“No! Yvette, what will I do? The play is in a week, I can’t play with a lump the size of an egg on my forehead,” the chestnut-haired girl lamented.

“Well- surely it will have decreased by then. Or you could borrow Ilse’s wig,” she offered and chuckled at Manuela’s disgusted grimace.

At that moment, the door to the infirmary flung open, and a very distressed Fräulein von Bernburg barged in.

“What happened?” she exclaimed, looking frantically between Manuela and Yvette. She instantly sat beside Manuela on the other side of the bed and brushed her fingers against the bandaged forehead, frowning in deep concern.

“Manuela… fell from the step-ladder,” Yvette provided hesitantly.

Fräulein von Bernburg’s complete attention was on Manuela, who was now letting her cheek lean tenderly against the woman’s hand. Her eyes were full of adoration and she was smiling a goofy, apologetic smile.

“I’m okay,” she assured. “It’s just a bump.”

“I heard the commotion in the hallway as I was about to leave; the

girls said you fell and hit your head…" the teacher murmured, still frowning, and obviously still in shock.

Yvette was silent on the other side of the bed but she was watching with unhindered fascination at the domesticity of the scene; Fräulein von Bernburg fierce and possessive and Manuela gentle and submissive. It was a side of them she had never been allowed to witness before. And it was obvious now, not that she doubted it, how much they loved each other. Unwilling to spoil the moment, but suddenly feeling like an intruder, Yvette let go of Manuela's hand gently and stood up from her chair. At Fräulein von Bernburg's inquisitive gaze, the blonde girl gave a reassuring smile.

"I'll let you have some time alone…" she offered. Then turning to Manuela, she added, "I'll be in the hallway just in case…" *Just in case Racket comes by*, was heavily implied, and at Manuela's grateful nod, she exited the room quietly.

Elisabeth pointed at the closing door with a rising eyebrow, and Manuela held out her hand in defence.

"I did not say anything. She just found out and I could not lie to her. She will never say anything, we can trust her," she assured as she linked their fingers together.

The older woman nodded mutely, glancing down at their joined hands.

"You really like her, don't you?" she then asked, her tone light.

"Very much so. Not as much as I like you, however," Manuela said with a genuine smile.

Elisabeth broke into a grin of her own and came closer to brush her lips gently against Manuela's.

"Well, isn't that precious."

"I should hit my head every day if it means I get to see you like this," Manuela said, grinning, and she kissed Elisabeth's hand softly.

“Don’t you dare ever do this to me again!” the older woman threatened, suddenly very serious. “What on earth were you doing on a ladder anyway?”

“A step-ladder. We were setting the stage for the play. We only have a week left, we need to get everything ready,” Manuela explained. “Will I see you then?” she then added, trying not to sound overly hopeful.

“Will there be other stunts involved?” Elisabeth said as she laid a careful hand on her lover’s bandaged forehead.

“There will be sword-fighting. Me in breeches and Westhagen with a wig,” Manuela added, before she burst out laughing.

“Just the first part would have been enough to convince me,” Elisabeth said and gave Manuela another quick kiss before she got up from her chair. “I should go.”

Manuela tried to hide her disappointment but smiled when the woman leant in again to press a tender kiss on her injured forehead.

“I wish I could take proper care of you,” she murmured.

“I promise I will sustain plenty of other injuries for you to tend to in the future,” Manuela assured playfully. “Good evening, Elisabeth.”

Blushing a little at the use of her first name, the woman walked to the door, “Good evening,” she said, before finally walking out and closing the door behind her. Once in the hallway, her eyes fell on Kleist whom, as promised, had been keeping watch to make sure they had a safe moment together. On impulse, Elisabeth squeezed the girl’s forearm as she came to her level and sent a gentle smile her way.

“Thank you, Kleist.”

The girl felt her cheeks turn crimson, and she met her eyes hesitatingly. “It was nothing, Fräulein von Bernburg.”

They looked at each other in silence, suddenly feeling very close over their mutual affection for Manuela and a certain understanding seemed to pass between them.

“Make sure she stays away from stepladders for a while, will you?” the older woman finally said with a knowing smile.

“I give you my word,” Kleist answered, chuckling.

With one final nod, Elisabeth walked away, still worried for Manuela but relieved that someone trustworthy and caring would look after her this evening.

## 26. Chapter 26

As the applause progressively faded, the company of amateur actresses stepped to the front of the stage holding hands, and saluted the variably enthusiastic audience. Almost all the teachers were there and even some family members had been willing to attend. The play might not have been perfect, some of them certainly had stumbled over a few lines –or literally stumbled, full stop- but the girls were ecstatic and proud of themselves. They had invested exceptional energy in this play, and although they were nostalgic it was already over, it also meant the end of the year was just around the corner. As they walked behind the curtain, Manuela took Treskow by the neck on impulse, “You did well,” she said with an honest smile. The blonde girl quickly wriggled away, but not quickly enough to hide her blushing cheeks. Manuela threw her head back in laughter, and went to congratulate her other friends backstage.

“My parents are here!” Westhagen yelped excitedly.

“Mine too,” another one said.

Manuela’s smile flickered slightly at the thought of her own family, but it reappeared almost immediately as Yvette came at her side to take her arm.

“Shall we head to the refectory? The families and *some teachers* will be here, I think,” she offered a little too pointedly.

“Uh… well, if we must.”

The girls burst into the refectory, crying gleefully as they greeted their respective family members. Almost everyone had someone to go to, and Manuela quickly scanned the room in search of her own special someone. When she caught sight of her, dressed in an elegant dark emerald silk gown, she felt her heart skip a beat. The fact that Elisabeth’s eyes were following her every move almost hungrily did nothing to appease the fluttering in her chest. She had only caught glimpses of her, sitting quietly in the audience, but she was even more breath-taking now, in broad light and so, so close... Manuela took a hesitant step forward, and at the almost imperceptible nod

from the other woman, she hastened up towards her, unable to tear her eyes away. Out of nowhere, she felt something hit her left shoulder, almost throwing her off-balance. After a brief moment of confusion, her eyes widened in fear as she realised she had just collided into Mademoiselle Aubert.

"Meinhardis!"

Manuela winced, bracing herself for the chastisement that would surely come. Instead of a reprimand, however, she felt two arms grab her shoulders. The teacher leant forward and planted two kisses on her cheeks as if they were life-long companions.

"You did amazing tonight, *vraiment,* you made me proud!" the petite woman chimed.

Manuela opened her mouth and nodded soundlessly, unsure of what to make of this uncharacteristic bout of admiration.

Very much oblivious to her confusion, the woman motioned for Manuela to come closer. "If you want to know, I think you're the only one with talent, here," she murmured conspiratorially. "The others are just terrible. But you, you could become an actress!"

Manuela felt uneasiness start to seize her and she nodded again wordlessly. She looked down to mask her embarrassment and caught the almost empty glass of wine the drama teacher was nursing. Well, maybe this explained the sudden fondness.

"Th-thank you… so very much, Mademoiselle Aubert. Your -uh your observations mean a lot," she babbled while slowly backing away. The woman gave her an awkward look, then brusquely turned around, holding her hand out to collar someone else in the crowd. Manuela let out a relieved sigh and, not wanting to be interrupted by any other tipsy teacher, rushed to where Elisabeth was standing.

Clearing her throat as she approached the woman, she performed a quick curtsey and was almost tempted to kiss her hand.

“Fräulein von Bernburg,” she greeted, amused by the brief flicker of displeasure in the teacher’s eyes. She hated it when Manuela called her that. It made her feel old. Inappropriate. Nevertheless, it was probably wise to maintain appearances in a room full of people.

“Meinhardis,” the older woman saluted in return.

“Did you enjoy the play?”

“Very much so. It was a very fine piece, despite the lead actress being somewhat… uncongenial,” she added with a playful smile, and had to bite her lip at Manuela’s contrite pout.

“Oh, is that so?” she murmured hotly, trying to think of a proper riposte.

“Hm-hmm,” Elisabeth nodded, her beam broadening even more.

“Well, I’ll have you know that I have received nothing but compliments. The critics have been unanimous.”

Elisabeth locked eyes with her and a small, pleased smile appeared on her lips, before she pushed her shoulder discreetly.

“You were perfect,” she finally murmured.

Manuela beamed, genuinely flushed this time. “I’m glad you liked it,” she said as she reached for one of the several glasses on the table behind them. Before she could bring the cup to her lips though, it was snatched away by the woman next to her.

“No alcohol,” Elisabeth whispered firmly, and handed her a glass with clear liquid in it. “Have some lemonade instead."

Manuela considered protesting, but a certain memory made any argument she might have had die on her tongue.

“Thank you,” she grumbled, accepting the offered glass reluctantly.

“It is for your own good.”

Manuela only sighed, although she had no doubt about it.

“Did I mention how lovely you look this evening?” she suddenly asked, trying her best to sound charismatic while sipping lemonade.

Elisabeth giggled nervously and quickly looked away.

“You did not. But I am glad you think so."

“I do. And I would very much like to dance with you, if not for all these people around. Maybe even kiss you…” Manuela murmured as she slowly leant in.

“Manuela…” Elisabeth warned under her breath, but her eyes almost fluttered shut at the idea. “Be careful.”

“Don’t worry. No one is paying attention to us. Quite frankly, I think Mademoiselle Aubert is drunk. And Racket… Racket is not even here.”

Well, this was certainly unusual. Delightful, but unusual. As if on cue, though, the doors to the refectory flung open, and Fräulein von Racket stepped into the room, followed by someone else. Surprised at first, Manuela felt her throat constrict painfully as she suddenly recognized the sombre, unfriendly silhouette.

“No…” she gasped in shock.

Eyes darting between Manuela's pallid face and this mysterious person, Elisabeth felt panic start to rise within her in turn.

“Manuela?” she whispered urgently.

“My aunt… My aunt is here.”

## 27. Chapter 27

It did not take long for Manuela's aunt to spot her in the crowd, and the girl felt bile rise in her throat as she watched the woman march resolutely in her direction, flanked by Racket. There was an evil twinkle in her dark, cruel eyes and the smile plastered on her face was even more disturbing. Her aunt never smiled. As the woman finally stopped in front of her, Manuela did her best to smile back, although it probably looked like a pained rictus from the outside.

"Aunty," she exclaimed forcefully. "What are you –I mean, what a pleasant surprise."

"Don't just stand there, child. Come and greet me," the woman commanded.

Manuela nodded and reluctantly complied, coming forth to press a quick kiss on her aunt's cold cheek. Backing away, she winced as she realised almost everyone in the room had their eyes on them, especially her darling Elisabeth who was, without a doubt, as confused as she was.

"You've grown. Good," Manuela's aunt declared, looking at her from head to toe. "But what on earth is this ridiculous outfit?"

Manuela gulped at the scrutinizing gaze. After all those years, her aunt still terrified her beyond reason. She straightened up and tried to hide her growing discomfort.

"We performed a play just this evening, aunty. It's a pity you've only arrived just now, you would have enjoyed it."

"Ah yes. This *thing* I received an invitation for," the woman fleered. "No time for such trivialities. I want you to pack your things and be ready to leave in 20 minutes."

"Leave? B-but why?"

“I am withdrawing you from school. You will be coming to live with your Uncle and myself until things are… settled.”

The words hit Manuela like a blow to the stomach.

“But why?” she repeated, eyes now wide with horror.

“The wedding has been advanced to this October and in the short time we have left, I want to make sure you are taught proper etiquette.”

“The… the wedding?” Manuela babbled, unable to form coherent sentences.

“Excuse me, but what is the meaning of this?” a confident voice interrupted.

Manuela turned to look at Elisabeth, and despite her dismay, she almost smiled at the vision. The woman had her arms crossed in front of her chest, a menacing eyebrow shooting up in defiance. The aunt lifted her aquiline nose in the air and pursed her lips in disdain at the unwelcome interruption.

“And you are?”

“I am Fräulein von Bernburg, Manuela’s teacher,” Elisabeth replied, unimpressed as she came to stand by Manuela’s side. “With all due respect, Your Excellency, school is not over yet and Manuela still has another full year left before graduation.”

The woman opened and closed her mouth, clearly not used to being confronted in such a way.

“I should not have to justify myself to you nor anybody in this school. This is preposterous,” she snapped. “Manuela is to be married by October and if you are so terribly concerned about her future, you understand she has more important issues to focus on than dressing up as a boy for a carnival.”

“What about her education?” Elisabeth retorted, outraged by the

ruthlessness of this woman.

“Rest assured that Manuela will receive proper education so she becomes a dutiful wife. A high school diploma will be of absolutely no use in that aspect, I’m afraid.”

“How dare you…”

“Fräulein von Bernburg, please,” Racket interrupted, positively glaring. “Your opinion as a teacher is well-noted; although unwarranted. Everything has already been arranged.”

As Manuela turned to look at Elisabeth with pleading eyes, the woman felt her heart clench painfully in her chest. She wanted to do something, reach out to her and whisper in her ear how everything would be fine, how she loved her. Instead, she tried to convey it all with her eyes and prayed Manuela would understand.

“I expect your employees to know their place, Fräulein von Racket!” the aunt spat.

“Oh but certainly, Your Excellency!” Racket drawled. “Fräulein von Bernburg, you will follow me into my office, if you please.”

The other woman barely paid them any attention and turned towards her niece.

“As for you Manuela, hurry up. The carriage is waiting.”

/

Walking down the stone stairs with her suitcase in one hand and a devastated Yvette clenching painfully at her other arm felt almost surreal to Manuela. The night had already started to fall, giving the whole scene a terrible sense of fatality. Inside, the party was still going although most of Manuela’s classmates were outside waiting

for her with aggrieved looks on their faces. Her aunt was there too, tapping her foot impatiently. Just behind her was Elisabeth, looking absolutely shattered, but somehow resigned, while Racket was whispering something to her. None of this appeared real; it simply could not be. It looked like a nightmare Manuela had had a hundred times. Only this time, there was no waking up from it. This terrible, unfair plight was unfolding just before her eyes and she had not even tried to fight it. Suddenly hit by a wave of lucidity, Manuela descended the few remaining stairs and stopped in front of her aunt, dropping the suitcase loudly at her feet.

“I'm not going,” she said resolutely.

“This is not up for discussion. Grab this suitcase and come with me."

“No! You can't force me. I… I refuse to go,” Manuela said, louder this time as her whole body started to shake uncontrollably.

"Meinhardis, don’t make this difficult,” Racket intervened, looking anxiously between the girl and her aunt.

The woman leant forward and caught Manuela's wrist in a painful vice.

“If you want to make a fool of yourself in front of your friends, by all means, continue this little game. I can assure you, however, that you will follow me into this carriage whether you like it or not, and even if I have to drag you there myself,” she whispered fiercely.

“Say goodbye to your friends and follow your aunt, Meinhardis,” Racket said insistently.

At that moment, Manuela was submerged by a group of girls who held her in a bone-crushing, heart-wrenching mutual hug. Unable to keep her emotions at bay any longer, Manuela finally burst into tears into someone's arms and before long, all the girls were sobbing as well.

“Manuela, what are you going to do?” Yvette murmured, wounding her arms around her neck.

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” she replied feebly.

“I'll write to you every day, I swear," the blonde promised, holding her close.

Manuela only nodded, and, with tears still streaming down her face, she looked straight at the only person she could not hold although she was dying to. What if she never saw her again? What was keeping them from embracing each other, now that everything was falling apart? Why didn’t Elisabeth make a move towards her? Watching her from afar with watery eyes, Elisabeth tilted her head and simply smiled; a beautifully devastating smile, and through the pain, Manuela allowed herself to see a little glimpse of hope. This smiled meant ‘*Everything will be alright, in the end’* and as she was dragged away by her aunt’s cruel grip, Manuela tried to convince herself of it.

## 28. Chapter 28

Summer was already drawing to an end, bringing along the promise of the very last year spent at boarding school for Yvette. The prospect of finally leaving this place, of never seeing these washed out, gloomy walls ever again was positively thrilling. Yvette would get to see the world, at last. She would be free, like any young woman her age deserved to be. However, the idea of facing this last year alone, without Manuela at her side, was almost unbearable. As promised, she had written Manuela a letter each day, and each day, she had waited nervously for a response from her dear friend to arrive. To no avail. It had been close to two months since Manuela had been snatched away by her aunt, and Yvette had received no news about her ever since.

Yvette shook her head in dismay before finally folding one of her last dresses and tucking it safely into her open suitcase. This evening, after spending summer break at her grandparents', she would be going back to school again. She already felt sick to her stomach as she imagined facing the empty bed next to hers. What if it were given to another girl? Certainly, Manuela would still be the subject of idle chatter for a while, as she had been during the last, excruciatingly long days of school following her departure. But eventually, the talks would fade and life would go on. In the end, Manuela would become a distant memory and Yvette would be left to mourn her absence alone… Well, someone else was probably in greater dismay now, the girl suddenly realised. Would Fräulein von Bernburg even come back this year? She had been barely been able to cope until school term had been over, spacing out and threatening to break down in tears every time her eyes would fall on Manuela's empty desk. Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Erika dear, do you need help packing your suitcase?" her grandmother asked, sticking her head in the doorway.

"No, thank you, grandmama. I am almost finished," the girl replied with a polite smile.

While Yvette's grandfather from her father's side was stern and disciplinary, her grandmother was a compassionate and loving woman, whose bright, clever eyes had the power to make most of Yvette's trouble vanish. She had spent summer teaching her how to cook, how to knit, never once alluding to Yvette soon becoming a wife, but simply because she considered it skills any person should have in order to survive, she had said. Sometimes, when they were alone, she would even tell her about her mother. Yvette had revelled in these precious moments and suddenly, she felt her heart clench at the prospect of leaving her.

"Alright, then. I will be in the conservatory, if you need me," the woman offered, before retreating and closing the door.

Yvette considered asking if there was anything in the mail for her today, as she had done unremittingly every day for the whole month she'd been here, but decided against it. Of course, there would be nothing today either. When the door flung open again and her grandmother re-entered waving an envelope at her, though, a wave of hope suddenly washed over her.

"Oh, this came in the mail for you this morning. I came up to give it to you and almost forgot about it."

Yvette all but jumped to her feet and took the letter with trembling hands. She quickly scanned it and felt her knees buckle as recognized that elegant, yet nervous handwriting. It was a letter from Manuela.

"Are you alright, honey?"

Yvette sniffed and just then realised that she might have been crying. She quickly wiped her damp cheeks with shaky fingers and looked up at her grandmother with a grateful smile.

"Yes, grandmama. Thank you very much for this."

"Alright," the old woman conceded, a little suspicious.

Without a word, she exited the room for the second time. Alone at last, Yvette promptly unsealed the letter and sat down on her bed.

*Hello my Dear Erika,*

*This letter may come a little late, I apologize. The reason is simple and I hope you do not resent me too much. I simply have so many things to do here that I seem to be losing track of time, these days. Please know that I think a lot about you and everyone at school. As I am aware, you will soon be going back, and I have no doubt this last year will be fantastic.*

*Even though my mind remains with you, I am happy; I am even learning how to play the harp. Leaving was not such a bad idea, after all and I wish you could be as happy in your life. Although I had my reserves, I realise that before anything else, a proper wife should learn to fulfil her duties. The time of selfish behaviour has passed, and I will now devote myself to becoming a gracious spouse.*

*Life cannot always be about entertainment and thrill. Having understood that, I finally feel quite at peace. Really and after all, it feels good to stop living for only myself and I. Longing for frivolities is not right for a girl. Can you believe how reckless I was, not that long ago? My aunt helped me realise what was really important and I have now fully accepted my role.*

*By the way, how is our dear Ilse doing; still terrible at algebra?*

*Certainly I will hear from you soon, I am really hoping you will write me back.*

*Yours,*

*Manuela*

Yvette had to read the letter twice and still, she was unable to comprehend what it all meant. Manuela was… happy? How could she accept such terrible fate that easily? What about Fräulein von Bernburg? And why was she calling her by her German name, all of a sudden? None of this made sense, not from the Manuela she knew. There had to be another meaning to this and she sincerely hoped there was.

/

Yvette felt an unexplainable sense of relief wash over her as she entered the dormitory and realised Manuela's bed had not been made. It meant no one would be using it just yet, at least. Unfortunately, it also meant her friend was not coming back anytime soon. She tried to ignore the other girls whispering behind her, but her relief was quickly replaced by an indescribable void, and tears started to well-up in her eyes. She almost jumped out of her skin when a friendly hand came to pat her shoulder. Spinning on her heels, she came face to face with Westhagen, who was sporting an apologetic smile. They exchanged a quick hug before the girl tilted her head towards the empty bed.

"She's not coming back, then?"

Yvette shook her head, not trusting her voice just yet.

"Did you receive any news from her?" Ilse pressed.

"I got a letter this morning but… None of what she said made sense. It is almost as if she did not write it herself."

"Well, maybe she didn't? Maybe her aunt did?"

"No, no. I recognize her handwriting; I know she wrote it… No offence, but she even asked news from you and nothing about… Well, it simply did not feel right, that's all," Yvette declared, shoulders slouching dejectedly.

Ilse pursed her lips, obviously deep in thought, then held out her hand expectantly.

"May I see it?"

Yvette threw her a suspicious look but after a small moment of hesitation, she reached inside her bag and deposited the letter in Ilse's waiting hand.

“What are you going to do with it?” she asked warily.

“I’m going to analyse it. Give me an hour; if there is a hidden message here from Manuela, I will find it,” the girl declared with confidence, before dashing out to her own bed.

Yvette shrugged and proceeded to unpack her suitcase, glancing impatiently at Westhagen who was now sitting on her bed and scribbling furiously on Manuela’s letter, tongue stuck out in concentration. The blonde girl was starting to wonder why she had left what would possibly be the last letter from her best friend in the rough hands of Ilse von Westhagen. After all, maybe there was no hidden message at all. Maybe Manuela was genuinely happy about her situation. As the horror of that eventuality started to dawn on her, Yvette was yet again shaken from her reverie by Ilse, who was now standing proudly in front of her.

“Come with me,” she whispered before dragging her by the arm and out of the dormitory.

“Well? What did you find?” Yvette asked impatiently once they were alone in the corridor.

Ilse handed back the letter, now decorated with various cross-outs and annotations.

“This had better be good,” Yvette sighed as she turned her attention to the piece of paper.

She quickly noticed Ilse had circled the first and last letters of each sentence and had scribbled down a series of seemingly random letters at the bottom of the page.

HATETHISPLACEPLEASTELLHERILLCOMEBACK

“Hate this… place?” Yvette enunciated uncertainly.

“Yes, go on!” Ilse nodded with unhindered enthusiasm.

“Pleas- please? Tell her I will come back. Is that it?”

“Absolutely! I remember showing her an espionage manual a while ago; it described all sorts of ways to encrypt messages. This one is very simple; you simply isolate the first and last letters of each sentence in a text to reveal a hidden message… I don’t know how she managed to still make mistakes though,” Ilse commented, obviously a little disappointed.

“This is amazing!” Yvette chimed and suddenly threw her arms around her classmate’s neck, not daring to imagine how Ilse had procured such a book.

“I don’t know who she is referring to, however.”

Suddenly uneasy, Yvette let out a nervous laugh.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’ll figure it out myself. Thank you again, Ilse,” she exclaimed before snatching the letter away and running back to the dormitory.

## 29. Chapter 29

All the girls were standing by their respective desks, anxiously waiting for their teacher to arrive. Yvette was especially nervous and made no attempt to hide it. She was terrified at the idea another teacher would walk into the classroom meaning they would never get to see Fräulein von Bernburg again. Manuela needed her. At that point, Yvette felt like she needed her as well. She would know what to do; she would find a way to help. Except if she chose not to come back. Except…

“Stop fidgeting!” her neighbour’s harsh command suddenly made her jump.

Yvette turned to her, unsettled. Why was Beckendorf sitting next to her anyway? This was Manuela’s place. Her desk. No one was allowed here except her. She was about to say so but the remark died in her throat at the sound of the door opening. A silent gasp went through the room, followed by a collective sigh of relief as Fräulein von Bernburg’s face appeared in the doorway. As beautiful and poised as ever in a white fitted blouse and a long black skirt, she walked to her desk in swift, ample strides, nodding slightly towards the girls who were gazing at her, fully enraptured. For a fleeting second, her eyes ventured to Manuela’s former place. It was barely noticeable, but Yvette caught how she bashfully lowered her eyes almost immediately, as if ashamed to have let herself believe Manuela could be there. It broke the girl’s heart and she held her breath, eager to hear what the teacher would say.

“Hello young ladies, and welcome back,” she finally greeted, a pale smile pulling her lips only slightly upwards. “I hope you had a pleasant and relaxing summer and are disposed to begin this last year studiously.”

The girls all nodded vigorously and the lesson started. From the outside, it almost looked as if everything was perfectly normal. Almost.

/

“Kleist, what is it? If you have something to tell me, I suggest you do it before I die of old age,” Elisabeth said without looking up from the sheet she was writing on.

She could sense the girl hovering uncertainly around her desk and although she felt guilty for the sharpness of her tone, she was in no mood to assume the role of attentive teacher today. Maybe she would never be in the mood for it ever again, as a matter of fact.

“I am sorry to disturb you but I think I ought to tell you something about Manuela…” the blonde girl began.

“There is nothing to say about Manuela,” she spat, suddenly slapping her pencil down on the wooden desk. “Manuela is gone.”

Yvette shivered under the icy stare and studied the teacher’s stance. She was cold and distant. She had never seen her like that. Deciding to stand her ground anyway, she suddenly reached for Manuela’s letter and held it out in front of her.

“I received this from her,” she declared, secretly hoping it would alleviate the woman’s foul mood.

As expected, it instantly did and Fräulein von Bernburg’s severe scowl turned into a look of genuine bewilderment. With wide, almost frightened eyes, she got up from behind her desk and came to stand right in front of Yvette, reaching out hesitatingly.

“May I?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Of course,” Yvette complied and pushed the letter into her hand.

Elisabeth carefully unfolded the piece of paper and could not contain her tears as she caught the first glimpse of Manuela’s handwriting. Pressing her fingers to her lips, she began to read the letter and Yvette slightly turned away, destitute in front of the woman’s obvious agony. As she stole a quick glance her way, she noticed the expression on her face turn into sheer confusion as the words seemed

to register. Ah yes… Maybe she should have explained…

“What is the meaning of all this?” the teacher suddenly demanded, brandishing the letter accusingly at Yvette.

“This is not what you think it is, Fräulein von Bernburg,” Yvette babbled. “Manuela did not really mean anything that is written here. I was surprised at first too; shocked even. She used a code. Here, let me show you.”

Yvette came at the woman’s side and pointed a finger at Ilse’s various annotations patiently, then at the sentence she had come up with. Elisabeth remained silent for an agonisingly long moment, and for some reason, Yvette started to grow nervous. She did not seem convinced. What if she did not believe her? Or worse; what if they had been… wrong?

“A code?” she simply enunciated after what seemed like an eternity. Her face was unreadable.

“Y-yes… Ilse showed it to her a while ago. We’re almost convinced that she…” Yvette’s febrile explanation was interrupted as she noticed the proud beam quickly spreading on the other woman’s face. It made her smile instantly as well, although she was not sure what was actually so amusing.

“Of course she would use a code. Of course,” Fräulein von Bernburg said, half-laughing, half-crying while she pressed the letter to her heart.

Yvette did not dare to mention that Manuela had made mistakes in her code, as Ilse probably would have and she chuckled affectionately.

“Yes, she did.”

“I thought I would never hear from her again. I knew I was not supposed to write to her… but still, I did, and she never replied,” the

teacher admitted, eyes suddenly sad again.

“Her aunt must be filtering her mail very strictly. I must have written around forty letters, and I’m sure she only received very few of them,” Yvette assured.

“I can’t imagine what she must be going through,” the teacher murmured and Yvette could only nod, the sole prospect making her brow furrow in concern.

“But we have a way to communicate with her now. And we will help her get away from this place.”

“We will…” Fräulein von Bernburg said resolutely, her hold still firm on the letter. “We absolutely must.”

## 30. Chapter 30

The dark dining room was only lit by the vacillating glow of a candelabrum, making her aunt and uncle's pale faces stand out in a particularly gloomy fashion on either side of the large wooden table. *Lovely.* Manuela sat quietly between them, sipping her soup while fighting hard not to wolf it down as she normally would after a long, tiring day. Now her days were still long and although not particularly tiring, they certainly were exhaustingly boring. If Manuela had once been told she would look back on the meagre meals taken at the school's noisy refectory with nostalgia, she would probably have laughed it off, but anything she had endured there seemed better than her current situation. As she plunged her spoon in the dark-grey beverage, an unexpected memory of Ilse shoving stale breadcrumbs inside Mia's uniform during dinner as a conclusion to one of their infamous arguments came back to her, and she hid her snicker behind her bowl.

"Is the soup too hot?" her uncle asked dully from his seat at the end of the table. Uncle had taken the habit of making small talk during dinner, a routine Manuela was not sure she actually preferred to the sound of their spoons scraping the bottom of their bowls in the otherwise quiet room. He was not a fundamentally bad man but he was not exceptionally pleasant either; if she really had to think about it, finding any specific adjective to qualify him was quite difficult. He never yelled, never got angry or made any snide remarks, and for that Manuela was grateful. Her aunt was certainly bitter enough for the both of them. He was simply passive and torpid; painstakingly, irremediably so.

"No, it's alright, Uncle."

"Gerda gave me this week's report," came an icy voice from the other end of the table.

Manuela turned hesitantly towards her aunt, who was studying her with dark, narrowed eyes. Gerda was her tutor, or the pain in Manuela's neck, as she secretly liked to call her. She was a stiff, tall lady in her late 50s with hollow cheeks and an aquiline nose that seemed to be constantly scrunched up in disdain. Manuela often wondered if it was a birth defect or simply the expression of her contempt for everything surrounding her. She was in charge of teaching her all sorts of nonsense, from starching shirts to cooking the 'perfect stew'. Days passed by and Manuela kept burning stews and ruining shirts –sometimes the other way around- hoping the torture would end and the woman would give up, eventually. But as it turned out, Manuela's stubborn ways were not enough to deter her; worse still, it only served to reinforce her rigorousness. Indeed, all errors were sanctioned and dutifully noted down in the 'report' her aunt dissected meticulously at the end of each week.

"Yes, Auntie?" the girl replied in anxious anticipation.

"It seems you did well, at last. You did not make a single mistake for the table etiquette test," she acknowledged, almost appreciative.

It took all Manuela's willpower not to roll her eyes. How exciting that her education was now purely restricted to knowing whether the fish knife came before or after the dinner knife. She felt no particular pride in that achievement, but managed a sort of smile. It seemed that submission and obedience, if only superficial, were the best ways to mollify her aunt and get some sort of sympathy from her. Manuela had been given her first letter from Yvette after her first good grade for whatever test she had decided to take seriously, for a change. She had subsequently started to pay more attention and be more diligent during her lessons until last week she had been given a pen, stationary, and the permission to write a letter a week. No doubt her aunt would carefully review and filter them, and the idea of using a code had been self-evident. She only hoped Yvette would be able to read through the lines and would not simply conclude she was suddenly finding her life quite enjoyable. Deep down, Manuela loathed this degrading system of sanctions and rewards as if she were

nothing but a dog performing tricks for a cube of sugar, but she was also painfully aware of it being her only connexion to the outside world and eventually, hopefully, her chance to get back to her darling Elisabeth. As she so often did when her mind drifted to the woman, she pinched her thigh viciously under the table to keep her emotions in check. Thoughts of Elisabeth were reserved for night-time, when Manuela was resolutely alone and she was sure no one would interrupt her painful but vital ritual. Lying there in the dark of her room, she would let tears fall freely down her cheeks as she tried to recollect every detail about the woman she so loved. She was afraid, terrified even that one day she would no longer remember the exact colour of her eyes quite so clearly, or the distinctive, high-pitched notes tinting her voice when she was nervous. Unremittingly, she would replay their interactions in her mind, from their first meeting, to their last kiss and everything in-between and she would laugh and cry at the vivid memories. In the darkest hours, Manuela would whisper words of love and promises of return, over and over again, hoping it would somehow get to Elisabeth. *Elisabeth…* Fingers automatically closed around the skin of her thigh, and Manuela almost let out a yelp.

"Are you listening?"

"I'm sorry auntie, I…"

The woman eyed her suspiciously for a very, very long time.

"I was about to let you go to the market next Sunday, but you are clearly not interested in such trivial activity…"

Next Sunday. The market. Outside…

"No! Auntie, no. I mean –please, I would be delighted," she babbled, trying to keep the tremor in her voice to a minimum.

"Of course, Gerda will accompany you."

*Of course.*

"I expect you will not see it as an opportunity to relax in your efforts.

You see that I am fair and that good work is always repaid, but I hope you will not make me regret this show of leniency, Manuela."

"I won't, auntie. I certainly won't."

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As she entered her bedroom that evening, Manuela took a moment to sit at her desk and reflect on what that little, seemingly insignificant outing could mean. Obviously, she would not be able to escape anywhere with Gerda and probably the coach driver breathing down her neck. But if she managed to get the message across to Yvette, maybe she would be able to meet Elisabeth there. Oh, seeing her beloved Elisabeth again. Tears welled up in her eyes at the thought. An incredible chance to at least look at her, maybe even talk to her. *Or touch her hand*. Unable to take it any longer and almost dizzy with elation, Manuela dipped her pen in the ink, and started composing her secret code with utmost fastidiousness.

## 31. Chapter 31

“Wait, what does ‘parket’ means?” Yvette asked, scrunching up her nose at the bizarre message she had received from Manuela.

As soon as the mail had arrived this morning, she had jumped to her feet and snatched the letter away before Rackow could even open her mouth. The tall brunette had shot her a disapproving glare upon realising the letter came from Manuela.

“She’s jealous,” Westhagen had murmured, knocking her slightly in the ribs.

Yvette had given Marga her best, brightest smile then, and planted a kiss right on her cheek before letting out a musical ‘Thank you’, and setting off with the envelope safely tucked under her arm. She had not bothered turning around, but if she had, she would have seen the generally stoic and insensitive Marga von Rackow turn a particularly deep shade of red.

Now Yvette and Ilse were both sitting close, almost glued to each other in the study room, whispering conspiratorially and frowning in confusion at the letter they had decrypted with much effort.

“It says she will be at the park next Sunday at 9,” Ilse said with confidence.

“It doesn’t make sense; I think she meant ‘market’,” Yvette retorted.

“Why would her being at the market make more sense than her being at the park?”

Yvette looked at her friend with indignation but she had to admit there was absolutely no reason for her idea to be better.

“She must have gotten confused at some point and mixed ‘p’ and ‘m’ together.”

“Anyway, she’s messy. She would have made the most terrible spy,” Ilse tsked, shaking her head in displeasure.

“We’re not assessing her ability to join the intelligence service! All that matters is what she wants to tell us!”

“Exactly! But with what she’s given us, we can’t know for sure… And we’re not even allowed to go out next Sunday. Actually, I’m scheduled to wash the shower room with Treskow. I don’t know which part is more revolting,” Ilse declared, quick to forget the dilemma at hand.

Yvette smiled patiently but her grip on the piece of paper tightened until her knuckles turned white.

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“Fräulein von Bernburg?”

The teacher almost jumped from her seat upon hearing the girl’s hesitant voice just next to her desk. The last students had not even entirely left the classroom, but she instinctively came closer, searching her face with probing eyes.

“Yes Kleist, what is it?” she asked anxiously.

“I received another message from Manuela,” the blonde girl said in a hushed voice.

“Oh, thank goodness. How is she?”

“I… I don’t know how she is exactly. She just said… I’m not sure what she said either.”

Fräulein von Bernburg remained silent but the look in her eyes indicated quite clearly that she was in no mood to play charades.

“Here, maybe you’ll understand this better than I do,” Yvette said, handing out the letter.

The other woman sighed, stern eyes still fixed on her as she unfolded

the piece of paper. She quickly scanned it and slapped it down on the desk almost as quickly.

“What does this even mean?”

Yvette’s shoulders dropped.

“I’m not sure…” she repeated.

“How should I know where to wait for her? I won’t have time to go back and forth, I need to be sure! It might be my only chance to…” Elisabeth halted her delirious jabber and glanced at the girl, who was looking back at her with apologetic round eyes. Immediately deflating, the teacher held out her hand and placed it on the blonde’s shoulder in a comforting gesture, unsure of whom she was looking to comfort, precisely.

“This is… Thank you for telling me, Kleist.”

“Of course, Fräulein von Bernburg…”

“I suppose improvisation will be in order, then,” the teacher said with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

/

“Stop looking around, young lady,” Gerda instructed, sending a displeased glance over her shoulder at a visibly distracted Manuela.

“Yes, Gerda,” she replied absentmindedly but did not stop scanning the crowd in the least.

She had barely slept the night before, plagued by incessant thoughts and irrepressible fears about how today would unfold. She had imagined a thousand scenarios. In many, Elisabeth appeared to her like an angel, and swiped her off her feet, kissing her with passion in front of the crowd. In her imagination, the crowd was not disapproving or scandalised, but people were cheering for them, and

some even had to wipe a discreet tear at the beauty of the scene, Gerda included. *How magnificent*, Manuela had thought, looking at the ceiling in wonder with a gigantic smile on her face. *Highly unlikely, but magnificent*. The worst scenarios included Elisabeth never showing up, or coming by to tell her that things were better like this, in the end, and to be very happy with her soon-to-be husband. Of course it was unimaginable. Elisabeth would never do such a thing? Would she?

“How many times do I need to repeat myself? You are to stay close to me and focused on what I do. You are here to learn, not saunter around,” the stern tutor hissed, shoving a heavy basket into Manuela’s hands.

Gerda had this ability to turn any random and painfully common undertaking into some sort of life lesson that would be absolutely critical for Manuela’s future, and a trip to the market was no exception, it seemed. *I don’t need a master class on how to pick carrots, you decrepit old witch,* Manuela suddenly wanted to shout. Still, she submissively nodded and pretended to be engrossed in the lecture. As it extended, Manuela was growing more anxious, all too aware that they would soon be leaving and that Elisabeth had still not appeared, in the form of an angel or any other, for that matter. In her sleeve, she could feel the stiff presence of the long letter she had written the night before and hidden there in the hope it could be discreetly handed out when the time was right.

“Very well, this will be all. Let us go back.”

Manuela’s restlessness turned into sheer panic at these words and she made no attempt to hide it.

“Now? We can’t! I mean… We haven’t looked at the stalls over there yet.”

“No need for it; we have seen everything we needed to see for today.”

*Oh no, I don’t think so!*

“But Gerda…” Manuela pleaded, tears welling-up.

“Should I make mention of this insolent behaviour in your report?”

The girl felt her shoulders slump in defeat and her stomach churn in unspeakable disappointment. Elisabeth had not come. Surely she had not received the message on time. It was the only explanation; it certainly did not mean she no longer loved her. She threw a long, searching look towards the people walking joyously around the market, before Gerda tugged her by the arm quite harshly towards their awaiting carriage.

“Stop pouting! You are no longer a child, you are a bride-to-be. And stand up straight!”

Manuela automatically obeyed, as if in a haze. Nothing seemed to matter any longer. She was empty, devastated. She watched as Gerda opened the door to the stationed carriage and hopped inside, nodding in annoyance for the girl to join her, and make it quick. Manuela took a first reluctant step on the footboard and thought she had heard her name being called out. It was probably just wishful thinking from her, she reasoned as she finally climbed up into the carriage fully. As she leant forward and shut the door, however, she distinctly heard her name being called, and she halted all movements. She took a tentative look outside the window, and felt her heart jump in her chest at what she saw. There, only a few feet away, a very familiar, very much hoped for silhouette was walking hastily towards her. With the frills of her long grey dress bunched in her right hand, and her left hand holding her hat firmly on her head, her adored Elisabeth was now almost running to the departing coach.

Manuela immediately reached for the door handle and was about to exit the carriage when a firm hand on her shoulder made her stop dead in her tracks.

“What do you think you are doing, young lady?” the woman spat just as the carriage started moving.

## 32. Chapter 32

Elisabeth stormed inside the house and slammed the door loudly behind her. Her hat and bag were scattered haphazardly in the entrance and she merely had time to press her back against the wall before her legs gave out under her and her body slid to the ground. She had maintained her composure all the way home, standing proud and seemingly unaffected under people's disbelieving gazes as if she had not just raced behind a departing carriage in her Sunday best. Elisabeth had not broken down in tears, nor had she cried out as the vehicle had started to fade away in the distance. Instead, she had fixed up her dress, squared her shoulders and made the crowd part before her, tilting her head impatiently as if to defy anyone to make a remark.

She no longer had to care about maintaining her perfect posture now. In truth, she no longer cared about anything. Caring was exhausting and in the end, useless. As she sat on the floor in her dark hallway, almost lifeless but completely rid of any care in the world, Elisabeth finally let sorrow overcome her and she broke down in tears. She remained prostrate for what seemed like an eternity, sobbing in silence with her face buried in her hands. *Manuela…* She had been right there, right in front of her. And she had missed her. What if all of this had been a dream? Manuela seemed so far away now, as if she had never been real in the first place.

Elisabeth gasped for air, and her eyes widened in horror at the feeling of emptiness suddenly ripping through her. Life before Manuela had been solitary, but never lonely. Elisabeth had always valued independence but something along the way had changed before she even realised it. Manuela's love had changed everything. With a sigh, Elisabeth forced herself up painfully, and made a stale attempt at smoothing down the wrinkles on her dress. The grey dress she had specifically chosen to wear for Manuela who, one day, had confessed that it was her favourite.

*"This one?" Elisabeth had asked, looking down at said dress somewhat sceptically. The gown was nice, but certainly one of the simplest she*

*owned.*

*"It's your eyes. With this dress, they look so blue. I can't seem to look away," the girl had confessed with an honest, adoring gaze.*

*Elisabeth had let out an embarrassed burst of laughter and kissed her quickly on the mouth.*

*"Your tastes are questionable, dear," she had huffed, although her eyes had been gleaming in delight.*

Elisabeth felt another wave of sobs threaten to overcome her at the memory. Manuela had probably not even seen the dress today and Elisabeth herself had barely been able to take a proper look at her. It had all gone so fast; her running towards the departing carriage, Manuela's desperate face leaning out the window as it gathered speed… And a flash of white falling in swirling motions to the ground, Elisabeth remembered with a shock. She had automatically ran to catch whatever had been dropped from the window, and, too afraid anyone else would seize it before her, she had tucked it in her bag without even thinking. How could she only remember this now?

Without delay, Elisabeth went to where the bag had been discarded and started rummaging through it in search of the precious item. In no time, the piece of paper was recovered and unfolded with impatient, fumbling hands. A letter from Manuela. No more cryptic messages sent through an intermediate, but a full, four-page letter written exclusively for her. Elisabeth brought the paper to her face on instinct and inhaled deeply, hoping she would catch even the faintest hint of Manuela's essence. A smile appeared on her face. Although it certainly seemed ludicrous, touching the paper that not so long ago had been caressed by her beloved's hands stirred an incredible sense of possessiveness within her. It made everything feel concrete again. None of this was a dream, indeed. Manuela had been there, and she had reached out to her. Elisabeth sighed with relief as her eyes looked over the very first line.

"*My dear, my darling Elisabeth*"… Manuela was not a dream, and she

still wanted her.

Elisabeth devoured the words avidly, feverishly with a hand pressed to her heart. Certain passages had her laughing out loud while others made her sob so intensely that she had to interrupt her reading. At times, particularly passionate and ardent words made her breathing quicken and her cheeks darken with a furious blush. Only Manuela could do this to her; inspire such distinct and complex emotions within her with mere words.

Her sentences were poised and unpretentious as she explained what her life was like now. She was sticking to mere facts, describing her daily lessons with detachment and a hint of cynicism that was so typically Manuela. Words of encouragement and love punctuated the letter; "*Please, wait for me*" and "*I will find a way*". However, Elisabeth could read between the lines. If Manuela was still there, it surely meant she had no way out. A date had been written down and underlined several times at the bottom of the last page as a sickening ultimatum. October 12. Elisabeth inhaled sharply. One month from now, Manuela would be married.

This seemed to make Elisabeth brusquely snap awake for the first time since their separation. She could not wait for Manuela to extricate herself from this place alone. If she attempted to escape and failed, her fate would probably be even worse than what had been originally planned. Manuela's hands were tied; but hers were not. The girl had been through so much, fought so bravely for them even when Elisabeth had rejected her. Manuela had never given up on them, and now that she needed help, it was her turn to be strong. Elisabeth had felt helpless and remained passive up until now. Of course, she had ruminated on the situation countless times but she had never seemed to find an appropriate solution. She could not hide Manuela forever in her house. If they were to remain together, they needed to leave *together,* somewhere far away, somewhere no one would ever think of looking for them. But where to go? *Think Elisabeth, think!*

Everything seemed to fall into place at once and Elisabeth's eyes widened in realisation. With newfound confidence, she rushed to her desk in search of stationary, sat down and, silently praying that her sister's address in New York City had not changed, she started writing.

'*My dear Ida…'*

## 33. Chapter 33

“You seem rather tense, today,” Eckbert noted, motioning vaguely at the quiet girl walking next to him.

As expected, the young man was the only person Manuela’s aunt allowed, or rather vigorously encouraged to visit her niece. Thus, twice a week, the two of them sat down in front of a cup of tea exchanging curt, often one-sided trivialities and, when the weather permitted, they took a stroll to the stables just behind the mansion. Manuela did not particularly enjoy these forced rendezvous, but she appreciated the breath of fresh air and the possibility to escape her aunt’s incessant scrutiny, even just for a while.

“No more than any other day,” she replied gloomily as they started making their way back towards the house.

For a moment, the only sound surrounding them was that of the dead leaves crushing under their boots. September was drawing to an end, and the realisation made Manuela shiver. She looked up at the white sky and wrapped her arms around herself instinctively as if to shield herself from the ineluctable deadline.

“Are you cold?”

“No!” she almost yelled, but he was already taking off his jacket and draping it graciously over her shoulders.

“I said I wasn’t cold.”

“Your shivering said otherwise,” Eckbert only shrugged, before looking away.

For once, he was not trying to be charming. For once, he was actually doing something out of genuine concern for someone other than him and it gave Manuela pause. Part of her wanted to throw the jacket to the ground and stomp on it, but the rational, educated side of her decided there was no need to be overly rude so she kept it on,

although not without letting out an irritated sigh. It was beyond her why boys always felt so compelled to behave with excessive chivalry all the time and girls were supposed to smile and just accept it, effectively making them believe they were indispensable. Really, Manuela thought, it was extremely aggravating. And unfair, too. *She* wanted to be the one wrapping her jacket over a woman's shoulders. Except she didn't even own a jacket, and the woman in question was completely out of reach for now. Elisabeth would probably be surprised if Manuela did such a thing in public. Perhaps she would erupt into embarrassed laughter, then look around to check that no one had seen them before whispering a hushed 'Thank you' and wrapping the garment even more snugly around her shoulders. Manuela's mind naturally drifted to lips curving into an impossibly bright smile, to pinkening cheeks and to warm fingers brushing against her hand.

"You're smiling." The remark was quiet but it seemed to detonate like thunder in the otherwise silent environment, and Manuela jumped in stupor.

"You scared me!"

"I'm sorry," he chuckled. "But you *were* smiling."

Manuela turned to look at him. Really look at him. His traits were regular and soft, almost like a girl's and his blue eyes twinkled with mirth. He was undeniably a very attractive young man, and at times like these, when he was unassuming and not overly forceful, he could practically pass as tolerable. In fact, up close and without his insufferable virile act, he did not look much older than she was.

"How old are you?" Manuela asked suddenly and she had to bite back a laugh at the sudden confusion on his face.

"I'll… turn 19 in February but it's… Why?"

"Just curious."

They both continued to walk in silence before Manuela turned to

study him again, her head slightly titled to the side.

“Have you ever been in love?” she asked and if his previous look of uncertainty had been funny, his gaping mouth and rounded eyes were downright hysterical.

“I – I…” he stammered. “What’s with the sudden questions? You never ask any questions!”

“I can go back to ignoring you, if you prefer,” Manuela snapped.

“No!” he almost yelped. “It’s only that, I’m not used to… No.”

“No?”

“I’ve never been in love,” he admitted in a low whisper, now unable to meet her eyes.

Manuela wondered where the confident young bachelor had suddenly gone, but chose not to comment on it.

“Oh…” she said instead.

He turned to her then, cheeks flaming red and tears almost prickling at the corner of his eyes.

“I focused on my education!” he cried, defensive and furious, and visibly humiliated. “I… I always knew I would be married to someone for convenience. I guess I have never given girls any thoughts until then.”

*Well, I have,* Manuela thought dreamily and sighed.

He did not realise it, but his situation was perhaps even more miserable than hers. He didn’t know love. He had probably never held a woman’s soft body against his own or brushed her lips with his. And even if he had, it had not been out of love. To Manuela, it was worthless. Invalid. She sighed again, and let the jacket slide

down her shoulders before handing it back to him. He looked at it for a short while, puzzled, then reached for it without a word.

“I’ll be honest with you, Eckbert,” Manuela finally declared, her voice solemn and resolute. “I have already been in love. I still am.”

He blinked, visibly questioning the quality of his own hearing, and stopped walking altogether.

“I am in love with someone else,” she repeated and there was no mistaking this time.

“But- but… You were sent to boarding school the moment your parents passed away! When did you…? How?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Manuela replied quickly, urgently needing for the conversation to *not* go that way.

“Who is it?” he demanded and his stupid, totally unjustified possessiveness had Manuela rolling her eyes.

“Please. It doesn’t matter. What I want you to know is that I love someone else.”

“Yes, I heard this.”

“But you must understand. I will never be happy with you. Ever. If, by some cruel misfortune I end up marrying you, I will spend the rest of my life trying to get back to he- to the person I love.”

Eckbert looked at his palm for a while as if a solution would suddenly appear there.

“You could fall in love with me, after a while. We barely know each other now but…”

“Didn’t you hear a word I said?” she interrupted, verging very close to frustration. “My heart belongs to someone else. No forced marriage, no self-proclaimed husband will change that. I will go back to the one I love eventually, or I’ll die trying…”

It was probably overly dramatic, but the way his eyes lowered and his shoulders sank told Manuela it may have been worth it. She decided to hit the nail right on the head and leaned forward to pat his shoulder.

“You deserve love too, you know. You deserve a wife who will run into your arms when you come home in the evening and will look at you like you are her whole world. Not someone who would spit into your food before serving it to you…”

“You would…?” he asked, appalled.

“Ah! Despair can make people do the most terrible things,” she whispered, eyes closing with melodramatic gravity.

“This is… I didn’t know you felt that way about me,” he muttered, hurt evident in his tone. It made Manuela feel just a little guilty.

“I think you are a good person. You can have much better than a false, loveless marriage.” And this time, surprisingly Manuela realised she really meant it.

He let out a long and shaky breath, and shoved both hands into his pocket before kicking a small rock with his foot. The confident young man was now looking positively like a rosy, disappointed child.

“It’s getting late. Let’s get you home.”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> Thank you to everyone who is sending reviews and kuddos, you guys rock my world <3 Also a quick note to inform you that I have changed Elisabeth's sister's name from Irma to Ida in the previous chapter -an unfortunate coincidence had me name her the same as a crappy murderous hurricane and we don't want that.

# 34. Chapter 34

“How long can it possibly take to make alterations on such a simple dress?” Manuela’s aunt growled in disapprobation.

“I am very sorry, Your Excellency. Perhaps if the lady would stop fidgeting so much…” the seamstress replied meekly, shooting Manuela a dirty glare from below. “Please keep your arms wide open and stand still.”

“I can’t stand still with needles pricking me from every angle, I assure you,” Manuela snapped back with similar disdain.

“Quiet!” was her aunt’s only word of support before she turned her attention back to her book with an exasperated sigh.

Manuela, too, wanted to sigh in exasperation. Rage was slowly building in the pit of her stomach and was threatening to overcome her every time she caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the gigantic mirror. She had delayed this moment for as long as she could, until she had completely ran out of excuses and her aunt’s patience had been challenged to a dangerous point. With the wedding now only a few days away, there had been no way to avoid this ridiculous dress fitting. And ridiculous was exactly how Manuela was feeling in the middle of the study room-turned fitting room for the day in that bland, second (or third?) hand wedding gown. She would tear that horrible garment to pieces the first chance she got. And probably even set it on fire too, for good measure, Manuela thought as a discreet smile crept across her lips.

“Is there something funny?”

Manuela made eye contact with her visibly unamused aunt in the mirror and was about to retort when the faint sound of the doorbell resonated from downstairs.

The woman held her gaze for a few seconds, her eyes cold and unwavering, before she got up from the armchair and went to the door.

“I want this to be over when I come back,” she commanded with a look over her shoulder, and disappeared in the hallway.

Manuela wondered who could be visiting on a Sunday, so close to lunch, all the more so since her aunt and uncle barely even received any visits. To be perfectly fair, it was not really surprising considering how trite and unpleasant their company was.

“Please. Stand. Still!” the seamstress ordered and Manuela complied with a faint nod as the woman resumed her work on the dress. Desperate for a distraction, the girl held her breath and strained her ear in the hope to catch any indication about this mysterious visitor’s identity.

For a moment, only the faint sound of fabric rustling and the clock ticking could be heard, and Manuela almost assumed the person was long gone until she heard a loud voice from downstairs. It appeared to be a woman’s voice and it was getting progressively louder. She could not make out the words, but this woman sounded agitated and possibly irritated, which made Manuela chuckle under her breath. When she heard her aunt’s usually low and monotonous voice rise uncharacteristically, however, she realised something was happening downstairs. Something possibly serious, or at the very least, entertaining.

“What are you doing? Get back here!” the poor woman protested once again as the girl took a few steps back to stick her ear against the door.

Her indignation only grew when Manuela held out a hand to silence her and she could only stand back and watch as the girl’s eyes abruptly widened, lightening with something akin to recognition.

“I’m sorry, I need to see what this is all about,” she mumbled hurriedly before collecting the fabric of her dress in her hand and

swinging the door open.

Manuela did not stop at the seamstress' outraged commands, and all but hurtled down the stairs, driven by an indescribable surge of hope. As she reached the last steps, she slowed down her pace and felt suddenly hesitant. From there, she could only see her aunt's back and she was still unable to identify her interlocutor from behind the slightly ajar door. What if she had mistaken the voice she thought she had recognised? No doubt her aunt would be furious if she interrupted her conversation without a perfectly valid reason… But when the other person spoke again, there was no doubt left and Manuela felt her pulse race so much that for a second, she thought she might faint.

"I am not asking much. I simply want to say goodbye to my students before I leave. And this includes Manuela…"

Wait. Leave?

Manuela did not think twice and hurried to the door.

"Fräulein von Bernburg," she simply said, unable to keep the tremor from tainting her voice although she could not yet see the woman fully.

Her aunt spun around, eyes dark and threatening.

"What do you think you are doing here? Get back upstairs!"

"I'm sorry auntie but… This is my teacher. Can't you at least let me greet her? It would be rude not to."

The woman glared for a minute, before letting her hand drop to the side and stepping away from the door.

"This woman came here unannounced and most of all uninvited; she

will not set foot into my house. If you want to freeze to death only to talk to her outside, then by all means, do so. You have two minutes," she recited through gritted teeth.

Manuela sighed in relief and did a grateful curtsey as her aunt walked past her. It took all her willpower not run outside, but when she finally stepped out and the ethereal vision of Elisabeth von Bernburg greeted her, Manuela could not contain her tears. She pressed her hand to her mouth to stifle a cry as her knees almost gave out. Although they had not seen each other for what felt like centuries, one look into those loving blue eyes and it felt like they had never been apart.

"Hello," Manuela whispered, not trusting her own ability to form words.

"Hello Manuela."

Elisabeth seemed similarly moved and she was smiling through tears, but her eyes conveyed a particularly heart-wrenching emotion. She looked hurt, more than anything else, and it made Manuela frown in deep concern.

"What is it?" she asked and instinctively reached out for her hand. It was warm and delicate, exactly as she remembered it. After all these months apart, Manuela was finally touching the woman she loved and it felt so incredible that her eyes closed for a split second.

"You look… very pretty," Elisabeth murmured and it suddenly dawned on Manuela.

She looked down at herself, in that stupid wedding gown and the need to tear it from her body came back even more forcefully.

"It's not… She made me try it on. I hate this. All of this," she said almost pleadingly.

"I know."

They studied each other in silence for a moment with their hands still joined in front of them.

“I love you.”

Elisabeth blinked, before breaking into a sincere, luminous smile and lifting her teary eyes to the sky. Her smile soon fell and she squeezed the hand in hers to the point it was almost painful.

“I’m leaving,” she finally said.

“You are?” was all Manuela could say in return.

“On Thursday. I will be living with my sister, at least for a while.”

“Your sister. In America.” It was not a question and Elisabeth nodded resolutely.

“Yes. And I want you to come with me.”

“Wh- Elisabeth! How?”

“Lower your voice. Your aunt might be spying on us,” the woman said, shooting a worried glance towards the house.

“She probably is,” Manuela said matter-of-factly but not tearing her eyes away from the woman in front of her for a second. “Now *how* exactly should I elope with you to America?”

“You just need to find a way to get to the station on Thursday. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Manuela’s mouth fell agape and she looked at Elisabeth as if she had suddenly gone crazy.

“No! What if I fail? Would you leave without me?”

Elisabeth took a sharp breath and looked away.

“Elisabeth, please. Tell me you wouldn’t leave without me.”

“Your wedding is planned for Friday, isn’t it?” she asked, her tone even but with a slight hint of reproach.

It was Manuela's turn to look uneasy. Of course. If she was unable to get away, there would be no way for her to avoid the wedding.

"We could still see each other… I don't want to get married. Lord knows how much I despise the idea… but if it could not be helped…"

"No!" Elisabeth snapped, yanking her hand away from Manuela's grip. "I will not stay here and wait in the dark for your husband to grant you a monthly cup of tea with your old teacher. I don't care if it is selfish of me; I want you all to myself. And if this is impossible, I would rather never see you again."

"Do you think I want any of this? Do you th- *all to yourself*? Now, I like the sound of that."

"Be serious! We don't have much time before your demented aunt comes back to shoo me away."

"Sorry, yes. What should I do?"

Elisabeth reached for something in her purse and took hold of Manuela's hand again before placing a small piece of paper in her palm.

"Everything you need to know is here."

"What if I can't get away? What if they catch me? Could it be the last time I see you?" the girl asked, her voice laced with sudden fear.

"I certainly hope not," the other woman replied with a smile, but apprehension was evident in her eyes. "I should go…"

"No, please. Please, not yet…"

"Manuela. Be reasonable."

Without a warning, the girl engulfed her in a bone-crushing hug and buried her head in the crook of her neck.

“My only wedding will be to you, one day.”

“Not in that ugly dress, I hope,” Elisabeth said with a watery chuckle and she tightened her grip around Manuela’s waist. “I believe in you, darling.”

“I… I will do my best.”

“Get back inside. Don’t watch me go. And I’ll see you on Thursday,” the woman said with one final squeeze. She pulled away, unable to resist pressing a quick kiss at the corner of Manuela’s mouth and turned on her heels without another word just as the door flew open.

“Manuela!” her aunt grumbled from inside the house.

“Yes, auntie. I’m coming.”

## 35. Chapter 35

Manuela looked anxiously at the clock for the umpteenth time and sighed in frustration. It was already ten past nine, and still, there was no trace of her breakout companion. Had she not been so tormented, Manuela probably would have laughed at the preposterous situation. If, by good fortune, everything went as expected, she would owe her freedom to Eckbert, but conversely, if her attempt to escape tonight failed, she would forever be tied to this man in the cruellest turn of events. Two days ago, during their last meeting before the fateful day, Manuela had all but begged on her knees for Eckbert's help. She had nervously waited for his answer after she had detailed her whole escape plan and had watched in horror as he had left without saying a word, his face grave and impassive. This was when Manuela had realised just how risky this strategy was, to the point of reckless. As far as she knew, Eckbert could have informed her aunt of her intentions by now, or he could have just dismissed the whole idea, knowing very well that Manuela could go nowhere without help.

But she could not miss this chance to leave, not when she had finally made up her mind. In spite of her overwhelming love for Elisabeth, Manuela had felt an uncanny reluctance at the idea of fleeing the country in such a rush without telling anyone. The idea of leaving with the woman she loved was overwhelming, of course, but what of the life she would leave behind? What of Berti? Would she ever see him again? Who would bring flowers to their parents' and Alfred's grave now? And how could she leave without even a goodbye to her dear Yvette? These thoughts had kept Manuela awake for the past few nights, her mind tortured between the guilt of abandoning the few people she had left, and the desire to start a new life with the only person who could bring her true happiness.

She rose from her bed and walked to the window, the precious piece of paper given by Elisabeth clutched tightly in her closed fist. Manuela already knew its short content by heart -'*Train to Hamburg at 10.34 pm. Platform B'*- but its presence in her palm was comforting somehow, like an invisible thread connecting them. She let her eyes roam over the dark, empty park outside. If she actually managed to leave tonight, at least a few people would undoubtedly miss her.

Some would surely be upset or saddened by her unexpected departure; others would be worried, resentful even. But ultimately, everyone would survive. However, if she let Elisabeth leave without her tonight, Manuela was not sure *she* would survive. Actually if she let herself imagine this eventuality long enough, she knew she would surely die of sorrow. A faint sound at the window interrupted her rumination. She rushed to the balcony and opened the French doors before leaning over the railing to look down.

The feeling of relief upon seeing Eckbert's head full of hair as he started climbing up the balcony was as indescribable as foreign and she felt her heart race uncharacteristically in the presence of the young man. As he finally reached the top, he jumped down next to her with a smug grin and extended his arms as if he expected to receive a well-deserved hug.

"Your Romeo is here, milady."

Manuela looked at the smile she would have found annoying in any other circumstances and burst in laughter, patting his cheek with sibling-like affection.

"I never would have thought I'd say it one day, but I'm glad to see you," she said before motioning for him to come inside. She abruptly stopped though, and glanced at him over her shoulder. "Oh, and by the way; the role is already taken."

He paused for a moment, a disconcerted look on his face.

"Why am I helping you, again?"

"You are helping yourself in the first place, remember. You could never handle a woman like me as your spouse," she explained matter-of-factly and he rolled his eyes, following her inside.

"Here is everything you asked for," Eckbert muttered, dropping the bag that was slung over his shoulder to the ground.

Manuela nodded and opened it; quickly scanning the bag's content before placing it into a bigger one holding only a few precious items she did not have the heart to leave behind.

"Do you have a coach waiting outside as I asked?" she demanded hurriedly, sliding both bags over her own shoulder.

"No…" he said, his tone cryptic, and before Manuela could protest, he quickly added, "I have even better! I thought you might like a ride in one of the most beautiful German cars ever made before you leave for the New World."

Manuela stared at him with wide eyes, effectively speechless. He had mentioned more than once his father's automobile with a certain pride, and she just could not believe he had taken the risk to borrow it for her.

"You know, Eck," she said after a while, shaking her head with a knowing smile. "I have to admit I am impressed with you."

"Are you impressed enough to stay here and marry me so that I don't get disowned by my father?"

"Not a chance," she replied without missing a beat and gave him a playful push on the shoulder. "But… Thank you. I owe you a lot," she stammered, suddenly uncomfortable.

He looked down, embarrassed as well and visibly unprepared for such a display of honesty.

"Don't thank me yet, you still have a long way to go."

She only nodded, her throat suddenly tight with apprehension, and she motioned for him to go first.

"Here goes nothing," Eckbert sighed before stepping over the railing with disconcerting facility.

Manuela followed close behind and they started their careful and overall quite hazardous descent down the wooden trellis. Manuela

silently cursed herself for not having changed out of her dress beforehand.

“Careful up there!” the young man below her cried out after she slipped and caught herself at the very last moment for the second time.

“No need to shout! I’ve got this.”

“If you fall on me, you’re on your own!”

“Be quiet! You’ll wake the whole house with your whining!” she urged through gritted teeth, now positively worried their bickering would be heard at some point.

The sound of Eckbert jumping heavily to the ground made her feel instantly relieved and she climbed down the few last rungs. *I am doing it,* she thought as her own feet touched the ground. She would take the train to Hamburg, and she and Elisabeth would embark on a boat towards America. They would finally be together and they would never go back. Her face broke into a smile and she did nothing to stop it.

This feeling of elation was, however, short-lived when a light flickered on in the room right above her. Her aunt’s bedroom.

“Manuela…” she heard the boy beside her stammer. “We need to run. Now!”

## 36. Chapter 36

Coming to the station an hour early had probably not been the wisest thing to do. The minutes ticked by with excessive sluggishness, an interesting, yet aggravating contrast with Elisabeth's racing heartbeat. She was sitting on a bench on the windy platform, all straight back and rigid neck, her incessant glances towards the clock the only exterior sign of nervousness. Inside, however, her emotions were running wild. Watching the trains come and go in the foggy night, masses of people flowing in and out of the gigantic steel wagons in noisy hustle, was somehow soothing, and it served as a momentary distraction until she was overcome with a fresh wave of dread and doubt. The same thoughts came to plague her mind in continuous cycles and she was now back to the point where fleeing the station and forgetting all about this insane plan of hers seemed like a good idea. Her resolve was threatening to fall apart, and lulled by the scramble and clamour around her, Elisabeth willed herself to close her eyes, desperate to release some tension. The October air was crisp and biting at this hour of the evening, and she rubbed her hands together, suddenly frustrated that she had not taken her gloves with her. And gloves were far from the only thing she had left behind… The suitcase on her lap felt incongruously heavy although she had made sure to pack only the strictest minimum. Looking back, the easiness with which she had disposed of almost every aspect of her soon-to-be former life was almost horrifying. Just this morning, she had posted her resignation letter and went to work as usual, as if she would not be leaving the country forever on the very same evening. More than once during the day though, she had felt her throat constrict and her voice waver with emotion that she had valiantly tried to conceal. As the girls had left the classroom after the final lesson, it had taken all her willpower not to interrupt their quiet blabbering and say something, anything… She loved her students dearly and imagining their dismay upon realising she would never come back was incredibly painful. But Elisabeth was also too conscious of the already fragile nature of her escape plan and thus, instead of yielding to a spontaneous, albeit understandable burst of emotions, she had remained at her desk, only nodding briskly at the girls as they had walked past her. *Just like any other day*, she had kept telling herself. And then she would be gone. It was no longer a matter

of whether or not she would leave, because she was leaving, no matter what. The only question was, would Manuela?

She had spent the whole day, the whole week conceiving all sorts of possibilities and imagining both the best and the worst in a terrible emotional uproar that had left her exhausted and confused beyond belief. When she had finally and reluctantly accepted her absolute lack of control over the outcome, she had decided to trust Manuela's love as well as her unparalleled wit and mischief. Surely, she would find a way to extract herself from her terrible predicament and they would be leaving together, tonight. And if she did not, well… Her inner conflict was soon interrupted by a very loud, and very nearby whistle. Her eyes shot open and she jumped on her feet instinctively. Her train was approaching the platform. And still, she noticed after sweeping the busy crowd with worried yes, no trace of a beautiful young lady running towards her with tousled hair, reddened cheeks and a tremulous smile illuminating her face. Elisabeth tried to reason herself, but she could feel the unmistakable weight of dread in the pit of her stomach and the sting of tears burning her eyes. Distraught, she rushed to a nearby railway man.

"Please, sir. I am expecting someone. We are supposed to take this train together but… it seems they have been delayed. Is there any way -"

He eyed her impassively, visibly unmoved by her predicament.

"We don't wait for passengers. Your friend will have to take the next train. Tomorrow," he drawled.

"Oh, but you don't understand…"

"That's right and I don't intend to. This train is not leaving a minute late. You're free stay here."

She watched with helpless consternation as he turned on his heels and walked away without further explanation. Around her, people were saying their goodbyes, some were loading heavy luggage inside and others were running to get in before the train left. It was time to

leave and the worst was happening. Manuela was not here. Elisabeth felt her knees wobble and her mouth suddenly became very dry. She was going to be sick. Or faint. Or both.

“Lady!” the same authoritative voice from earlier shouted in her direction. “The train is about to leave. Are you getting in or not?”

It was over, she realised. She would never get to see Manuela again and any hope of a quiet, happy life together was now shattered beyond repair. With one last look around, she nodded mutely and stepped forward with slow, mechanical strides. Her head was buzzing as she stepped into the wagon and her eyes glossed over dozens of unfamiliar, hostile faces. She sat down numbly at her seat even as the whistle resounded from outside and the train started moving at an agonising pace. With one last, foolish surge of hope, Elisabeth pressed her forehead against the window in the hope she would see a longed-for figure run at full speed toward the departing convoy. She remained in this position for a while, long after the train had reached its full speed and was leaving the outskirts of town. Her mind was now completely blank and she looked at her pale, ghastly reflection with detachment. It was almost like staring at a total stranger and nothing seemed to be left of the nervous yet hopeful woman she was just this morning. Elisabeth felt crushed, utterly empty, and she looked like it, too. She did not acknowledge the young man taking the seat just next to hers, nor did she flinch when he kept his hat on without saluting her as he did so. Normally such cavalier attitude would have outraged her, but her mind was elsewhere. Things such as common courtesy no longer seemed to matter, not when life itself had suddenly lost all meaning. Was there even a point now that her reason to live had been so cruelly snatched away from her? The sobs overcoming her body seemed to take her by complete surprise and she modestly turned aside in an attempt to quiet her whimper. The next thing that surprised her was the hand that suddenly brushed her thigh and before she knew it, squeezed it with rather categorical determination. It instantly made her come back to her senses and she turned towards the culprit, outraged and with fire in her eyes.

“How dare y-” she started, but her retort almost instantly died in her throat when her gaze fell upon two bright, laughing blue eyes.

In front of her, most of her face hidden by a large man’s hat, was Manuela. She did not realise she had started screaming until she felt a strong, but tender hand press against her mouth. Manuela shook her head, encouraging her to remain silent. Then, she leant forward and murmured in her ear, “Come with me,” before taking her by the hand and dragging her along with her through the wagons. They stopped between two coaches and Manuela finally turned to her, taking off her hat quite demonstratively. Elisabeth, still aghast, only stood there with wide, disbelieving eyes. Manuela was wearing a man’s suit and apart from her long hair now falling freely over her shoulders, she had to admit the outfit looked rather convincing. In spite of the roaring clatter of steel surrounding them, time seemed to have suddenly slowed down and they studied each other, silently, almost timidly for a long while. The younger woman finally took a tentative step forward, lifting her hand to touch Elisabeth’s cheek, but she was outpaced when the woman suddenly threw her arms around her and crushed their lips together in a passionate kiss. Manuela kissed back with abandon and wound her arms around the trembling body against hers, lost in her infinite adoration for this woman. They kissed and kissed, until Elisabeth was crying in joy and Manuela was smiling in amazement against the warm, soft skin that was now undeniably hers, *finally* hers. After a while and with great care, she took Elisabeth’s face in her hands and wiped the ghost of tears on her rosy cheeks as she lost herself into bottomless blue orbs.

“I cannot believe it…” Elisabeth finally admitted, pressing her forehead against Manuela’s.

“Well, if I’m being completely honest, neither can I.”

“I thought I would never see you again… I almost punched you in the face,” she realised with sudden outrage.

“Now, that would have been funny,” Manuela chuckled. “But I’m glad you didn’t,” she added before kissing her lips once again. Elisabeth reluctantly pulled away but she kept her arms tightly locked around Manuela’s waist, now eyeing her with a mix of wonder and suspicion.

“But Manuela… how?”

Manuela gave her a crooked, quite mysterious smile and took a step back, quickly pulling her hair back up and hiding it once again under the hat.

“That, my love, is a story for later. For now, we should remain cautious until we reach the boat. You know, just in case they would be looking for two beautiful fugitives attempting to flee the country together,” she said with a wink and Elisabeth huffed, although the smile on her face was blinding.

Manuela took her by the waist again and pressed their bodies close together.

“We should go back to our place, pretend we don’t know each other. Although… I am not sure how I am supposed to stop kissing you when I just found you again,” she murmured, her apparent confidence in total contradiction with the angry blush now spreading over her cheeks.

Elisabeth closed her eyes and sighed as Manuela started kissing her neck with soft, languid devotion.

“Manuela…”

With great difficulty, she pushed her newfound lover by the shoulders and took a step back. She probably looked quite flushed herself, and she looked away in embarrassment while attempting to fix her hair.

“We –hm, we should head back. You’re right. Let’s not raise suspicion

until we are sure it is safe.”

Manuela looked down and nodded in resignation, but not before stealing one last kiss.

“See you soon, darling.”

“Very soon, indeed.”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> Sooo, this one took forever, but it's here at last! We're now reaching the end of the story and I'd like to thank each and everyone of you who commented, read and mostly just enjoyed that long ride along with me :) I never thought I'd commit to something for such a long, sustained period of time but I ended up being sucked into it even more than I originally thought, and it's mostly thanks to all of your kind words of encouragement! There will be an epilogue sometime before Christmas, because I can't exactly leave Manuela and Elisabeth like this. So watch out for it!

# 37. Epilogue

***December 25, 1914***

Elisabeth awoke with a start as she reached out unconsciously in her sleep and realised the spot in bed next to hers was empty. She sat up against the headboard, disoriented. One quick look out the window told her that it was still relatively early in the morning, as only the pale light of dawn was seeping through the closed curtains. It was unusual for Manuela to wake up before she did, let alone without making such unimaginable ruckus around the room that it would eventually wake her up, too. And today of all day… Well, it was especially unusual. Now fully awake and rather concerned, Elisabeth threw the covers back and winced when her naked feet touched the cold wooden floor. She put on her robe in haste and exited the room, soon realising the whole apartment was plunged into darkness. On instinct, she stopped in front of her sister's bedroom door. Maybe Ida knew where Manuela was… When they had arrived in New York a little over a year ago now, her younger sibling had welcomed them with open arms, positively unfazed by their quite unconventional relationship. All three of them had been sharing a small but comfortable flat since then and without delay, Elisabeth had found a job as a German literature teacher. Meanwhile Ida, who was starting to make quite a name for herself as a singer in Broadway, had introduced Manuela to a theatre company of brilliant foreign artists and the young woman had been thriving onstage ever since. Working in the same environment six days a week had quickly tightened the links between the two, and they were now as thick as thieves, much to Elisabeth's amusement –and sometimes, dismay. As Manuela would often put it, and in spite of their striking physical resemblance, both sisters were polar opposites, Ida being as lenient and cheeky as Elisabeth was strict and well-manned.

She gently opened the door and noticed her sister was fast asleep. The older woman repressed a chuckle, well aware of the reason behind Ida's deep slumber. She had requested her help in the middle of the night to bake Manuela a chocolate cake for her birthday, which Ida had begrudgingly accepted, not without muttering about disgustingly romantic people and no one in this house respecting her

much needed beauty sleep. Deciding she would not risk facing her sister's ire twice in so little time, Elisabeth closed the door and made her way to the living room.

"Darling?" she called out tentatively, only to be met with eerie silence.

She padded to the kitchen to boil some water for tea, hoping it would help defuse some of her growing anguish. As she sat down at the table, her eyes fell on an open letter that Manuela had probably read before leaving, because it hadn't been here when Elisabeth had finished cleaning the kitchen the night before. She brushed the envelope with trembling fingers and closed her eyes, suddenly overcome with sorrow. This was the letter Manuela had received from Bertram a few days ago. A letter from the front. She didn't need to read it again; she knew all too well what it said. A few, hurried scribbles to wish his sister an early happy birthday, ensuring that he was just fine and asking her to take good care of herself and send his regards to Elisabeth. It was not the content of the letter that was terrifying, but precisely what it didn't say. It was only the second letter she had received and Bertram never wrote a word about the atrocities of war, but chaos and despair were oozing from the now laconic sentences of the usually optimistic young man. Elisabeth let out a ragged breath and let her head drop in her hands. Manuela had been growing particularly restless and anxious these days, and although she never voiced her concern out loud, maybe this was the reason she was gone. Maybe today of all days, she didn't want to celebrate.

Her musings were interrupted by the sound of a key in the door, followed by muffled, uncoordinated footsteps and low, but noticeable… grunts?

"Manuela?" Elisabeth called out, before rushing to the entryway.

There, in a gigantic grey winter coat with a green scarf tightened around her neck and snowflakes slowly melting over her hair and shoulders, Manuela was standing in all her glory. Her nose and ears were red from the cold and she was half-hugging, half-dragging a very huge tree.

“What on earth…” Elisabeth started, eyeing the mess with incredulous round eyes.

“I’ll clean that,” Manuela hurriedly assured. “But look… A Christmas tree!”

The older woman instantly softened at the hopeful smile on Manuela’s face and she let her arms fall to her sides, shaking her head with a grin of her own.

“What am I going to do with you?”

“Kiss me, maybe?”

Elisabeth laughed and happily complied, pulling the young woman to her as the tree fell down on the floor in a noisy and snowy clutter.

“You’re freezing,” Elisabeth commented, pressing warm hands against Manuela’s ice-cold cheeks. “Where did you find this?”

Manuela chuckled uncomfortably.

“I found it… in the park.”

“You cut a tree in the park in the middle of the night?”

“Are you mad?” she asked, suddenly sounding so vulnerable that Elisabeth felt her heart swell with buoyant adoration.

“Never. I was worried when I woke up and you were gone…”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

The other woman stifled a laugh.

“People are supposed to surprise *you* on your birthday, not the other

way around," Elisabeth said softly.

"I know but… I wanted us to have a proper Christmas tree this year. To celebrate as a family, and think of those who are not here with us."

A chill went up Elisabeth's spine and she nodded quickly, hoping to prevent tears from forming in her eyes. She let her hands cup Manuela's strong jaw and allowed her eyes to linger on her face. Her features were still incredibly pure and soft, almost angel-like but her eyes were more serious now, and a slight crease between her eyebrows betrayed the everlasting anxiousness that had always inhabited her. Elisabeth often kissed this merely noticeable wrinkle, telling her to stop frowning and unmistakably, Manuela would roll her eyes with a chuckle and utter a falsely meek, "Yes, Fräulein von Bernburg!" Manuela hated talking about her fears and Elisabeth respected her boundaries, especially since one look into Manuela's eyes was enough for her to fathom what was going through her mind. Gently, she buried her face in the younger woman's neck, feeling the irrepressible urge to be close, even closer to her. She ignored the damp coat pressing against her flimsy robe as Manuela let her fingers dive into silky hair, slightly messy from sleep. They remained like this for a while, just hanging onto each other in the darkness of the hallway and relishing their unhindered proximity. It might have been more than a year now since they had escaped the fatherland, but it still felt a little illicit, just a little inconceivable for them to finally be free to love each other, even just in the intimacy of their home.

"It's still early," Manuela whispered in her ear and she smiled as she felt Elisabeth only nod against her neck. "Too early for my surprise?" she then asked, slightly pulling away from the hug.

Elisabeth studied her face seriously with pursed lips for a moment before breaking away from the embrace and ordering, "Take off these drenched clothes and come to the bedroom."

"Not for that, silly," she groaned as Manuela's eyebrows shot up and

a wicked smile appeared on her face. She started walking towards the room and, with a look over her shoulder, she added, “Not *just* for that.”

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A few hours later, the Christmas tree was standing proudly in the small living room, eating away almost all the light and space there, although none of this seemed to bother the three women who were decorating its branches with the last colourful ribbons while chattering joyously. As a matter of fact, only two of them were busying themselves while the third one was sprawled on the armchair, taking enthusiastic bites of chocolate cake while shouting random directions here and there.

“No... More to the left. There’s too much red here already, too much!”

Elisabeth turned to her sister with a disapproving glare and snatched the plate away from her hands.

“This is Manuela’s cake!”

“I’m helping her. She cannot possibly eat a whole cake by herself,” Ida whined, holding out her arms to catch the plate again.

“I most certainly can!” Manuela informed her with a certain amount of pride. “But I already have the most wonderful present of all right here,” she added, pressing a book against her heart and wrapping her arms around Elisabeth’s waist as she passed nearby. “And the book is a lovely gift as well,” she murmured in her ear before kissing her lips lovingly. They ignored the offended sounds from the armchair and let the kiss deepen. They were interrupted by a tap against Manuela’s shoulder and a nosy hand snatching her book away.

Ida looked at the cover and shook her head disapprovingly, fair hair flying about her face. It read *Romeo und Julia.*

“What happened to Manuela needing to improve her English, by the way?” she mocked.

Without delay, Manuela rescued the book away from the prying grasp, playfully baring her teeth at Ida.

“This is an exception,” Elisabeth replied with a cryptic smile, and her sister raised her hands to the sky, sighing with exaggerated frustration. Elisabeth let out a heartfelt laugh, her eyes never leaving Manuela’s. This was their life now, she thought. It was not perfect, and surely enough there would be other hardships to endure, but they were safe, and in love, and whatever came their way next, they would be facing it together. And this in itself, was wonderful.

“Happy birthday again, Manuela.”

“Thank you, my love. Thank you for everything. And Merry Christmas.”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

> I really wanted to post this on the 25th but I was too afraid I would forget (and to be honest, I was growing a little restless). Sooo… this is it, people! What a ride and what a pleasure this has been! I hope you enjoyed that story as much as I enjoyed writing it and who knows, maybe inspiration about these two will strike again at some point ;) Until then, thanks to all of you, and Merry Christmas!